"I Am in the, and Thow Are in Me": Finding Feminine Spirituality in the Book of Margery Kempe

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“I AM IN THE, AND THOW ARE IN ME”: FINDING FEMININE SPIRITUALITY IN *THE BOOK OF MARGERY KEMPE*

By

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To my Mother
who has made everything possible
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................ vi

Introduction ................................................................................................................................. 1

**Chapter One:** Flesh Tears and Physicality: The Importance of Corporeality in *The Book of Margery Kempe* ................................................................................................................. 7

**Chapter Two:** Searching for Our Literary Foremothers: The Didactic Purpose of *The Book of Margery Kempe* and the Influence of Medieval Drama .......... 29

**Chapter Three:** Identity, Authority and Audience: Margery Kempe’s Anxiety of Authorship and Desire for Autonomy ................................................................. 52

Works Cited ................................................................................................................................ 70

Biographical Sketch ................................................................................................................... 72
ABSTRACT

This paper explores the transition of Margery Kempe from a married laywoman to celibate mystic in *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Margery grapples with three very different and distinct challenges in the course of finding her spiritual niche in the patriarchal-dominated medieval Church. Margery must first deal with overcoming the Church’s view that her body was a site of sinfulness and ontological monstrosity. She then chooses to seek the aid of her spiritual predecessors and discover where she fits into the tradition of female mystics. Finally, she must come to terms with the fact that due to the fact that she was functionally illiterate, she must filter her biography through the hand of a scribe. Throughout all of her experiences, she constantly seeks validation from the male clergy, her spiritual foremothers, and other members of society. However, to alleviate her fears and anxieties, Margery must go within herself, get her narrative written and carve her own space within the Catholic Church. By doing this, she effectively makes her place within the Church, the literary canon, and creates the first autobiography in the English language.
INTRODUCTION

*Thys creatur was sent of owyr Lord to divers placys of relygyon and among on sche cam to a place of monkys wher sche was rygth despised hir and set hir at nowt* (Kempe 39)

Standing up to the face of criticism from male clerics represents Margery Kempe’s greatest challenge throughout *The Book of Margery Kempe.* Margery’s transition from married laywoman to celibate mystic and visionary defines the journey she takes in the twenty year period she spans within her text. Margery desires to find a proper niche in the Church hierarchy as well as establish her own autonomy as a religious woman. Yet, the Church’s misogynistic views about women’s bodies, authorship and tradition stand as hurdles through which Margery must break. Her femininity and social role as a wife ostracize Kempe from the Church’s acceptable female positions, such as anchoress or nun, so Margery must create an entirely new niche for herself by reversing the acceptable norms. By using her physicality, Margery is able to overcome the clerical prejudices, and break through the chains of traditional femininity to validate herself a mystic.

Kempe’s struggle for religious autonomy and acceptance, however, is not a phenomenon that was limited solely to medieval women. Centuries later Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar explicated many of Margery’s concerns, fears and anxieties for the nineteenth century woman writer in their book, *The Madwoman in the Attic.* Their overall argument lies in the idea that femininity is sharply divided among binary poles: women are either “angels” or “monsters”. To be “angelic woman” means to limit oneself to being domestic, passive, naïve and reliant on male authority. They borrow Virginia Woolf’s phrase that this woman is the “Angel in the House.” On the opposite pole, the “monster” woman is independent, out of the house, authoritative and potentially threatening to male dominance. The “monster” woman is viewed as anti-feminine and masculine while the “angel” is the true embodiment of a good woman.
Margery and other religious women were inscribed into this dichotomous position in the fifteenth century by the Catholic Church. The hierarchical structure excluded women from obtaining clerical positions and often viewed them as the Other; they believed them to be controlled by their flesh and lacked the reason and rationale of men. Margery’s position of being a wife further pushed her into the “angel in the house” role—to be a “good wife” she has to have full obedience to her husband, submit to him sexually, and maintain his household, including children. Gilbert and Gubar argue, “The angel-woman should become her husband’s holy refuge” (Gilbert and Gubar 24).

Margery’s first call to God comes after she experiences a post-partum episode of “madness.” She recognizes that God has saved her, but it is not until twenty years and fourteen children later that she receives a second calling. When she hears “a sownd of meoldye so swet” (Kempe 26), she decides to truly devote her life to becoming a female mystic. She wishes to step outside of her traditional wifely role and into the realm of spirituality. Her challenge throughout the course of her narrative is to find a middle ground between the angel and monster poles. She wishes to step into the more masculine realm, out of the house and on holy pilgrimages, while retaining her femininity. She does not wish to be the anti-feminine; the space she seeks is both religious as well as related to the Church’s concept of acceptability for women. She wants to create an entirely new classification for herself.

In finding this “middle ground,” Margery suffers some of the same anxieties that Gilbert and Gubar describe for Victorian writers. There are three main arguments they employ that transfigure into The Book of Margery Kempe are: physicality, finding a spiritual foremother, and battling the anxiety of authorship. Each component addresses a different problem that Margery faces throughout her journey but they all fit into the larger picture of Margery searching for her religious niche. All of the different challenges contribute to Margery’s finding of her spiritual identity, and breaking free of the dichotomous limits that the clergy impose upon her.

The first and most important for Kempe lies in the woman’s relation to her body. Gilbert and Gubar explicate this idea, “Women in patriarchal societies have historically been reduced to mere properties by male expectations and designs. Female figures have incarnated men’s ambivalence not only toward female sexuality but toward their own
(male) sexuality” (12). Margery must cope with the idea that her body is viewed as “monstrous” and that her flesh hinders her from succeeding in her misogynistic surroundings.

During the Middle Ages, according to St. Jerome’s model, the most highly regarded state for women would have been virginity. This presents another hurdle through which Margery must break—not only does she have to deal with overcoming her monstrous flesh, but she must also cast pregnancy and childbirth in a different light to justify the holiness of that state. Regarding the act of procreation, Gilbert and Gubar note its depersonalizing properties. They state, “The female womb has certainly, always and everywhere, been a child’s first and most satisfying house, a source of food and dark security and therefore a mythic paradise imaged over and over again. The confinement of pregnancy replicates the confinement of society” (88-89). Kempe’s challenge therefore is to reverse the view of pregnancy into something positive. By using positive examples of motherhood including the Blessed Virgin Mary and St. Anne, Mary assuages the harsh view that pregnancy equaled sexual lasciviousness.

Kempe’s combined tactics make the flesh that binds her into that which liberates her. She uses her body to physically “feel” Christ and experience her spirituality. By doing so, she excludes the male clergy from the privilege and creates the “middle” space between angel and monster. She emphasizes Christ’s corporeality as well as that of other women mystics to prove that the flesh is the ideal conduit for experience God. Her body does not make her a monster; rather, the physical and womanly bodily experiences, including pregnancy, create her own niche in the spiritual scheme.

The second tier of Gilbert and Gubar’s argument that is particularly applicable to Kempe’s narrative is the idea of a woman writer seeking a “literary foremother.” They claim she is necessary because of “the loneliness of the female artist, her feelings of alienation from male predecessors coupled with her need for sisterly precursors and successors, her urgent sense of need for a female audience together with her fear of the antagonism of male readers” (50). Margery does not say she actively seeks another woman to model herself upon; yet, it is painfully clear that she attempts to carve her niche by aligning her story with that of spiritual and authorial female predecessors.
Margery explicitly mentions three women throughout the course her *Book* numerous times. The stories and experiences of Bridget of Sweden, Julian of Norwich and St. Mary Magdalene bear striking parallels with episodes in Margery’s life. The strongest resemblances are between Margery’s story and the Digby *Mary Magdalene* play. She makes several references to the saint, including the fact that her scribe began to write her book “in the yer of owr Lord a 1436, on the day next aftyr Mary Maudlyn aftyr the informacyon of this creatur” (Kempe 21). The legend of the repentant whore seems to help Margery frame her story and transition from sexual wife to celibate mystic.

Regarding the real life female mystics, Margery makes reference to them, particularly when she visits Julian in Chapter 18 and when she makes a pilgrimage to Bridgittine sites in Rome. In her *Book*, Margery’s scribe writes that Julian, “hyly thankyd God wyth al hir hert for hy vistacyon, cownselyng this creatur to be obedyent to the wyl of owyr Lord God and fulfyllyn wyth al hir myghtys whatevyr he put in her sowle” (Kempe 53). Thus, Kempe shows what an inspiration Julian was to her. With Bridget, who died a century before Kempe, has prophetic implications. Kempe recalls, “And sche knelyd also on the ston on the whech owr Lord aperyd to Stey Brigyte and told hir what day she schuld deyn on” (99). This pilgrimage helps solidify her goals as placing herself in the same category as Bridget.

In the beginning of her *Book*, Margery seems to look to these women as models, and hopes that they can validate her efforts to break into the spiritual system. She uses the visits to Julian and Bridgitean site to provide consolation, hope and guidance. The hagiographical account of Mary Magdalene’s life frames Margery’s character, and the theatrical representation of Mary coincide with spiritual episodes in the *Book*. Mary has to “fall” into temptation in her life and then turn to devote her life to God; Margery details the same kind of transition as the focus of her story. Yet, these women cannot validate Margery. Just as Gilbert and Gubar’s literary foremothers do not negate the woman artist’s “anxiety of authorship,” Margery’s religious foremothers do not grant her autonomy. For the woman artist, Gilbert and Gubar write that the woman writer, “only transcends her anxiety of authorship by revising male genres” (Gilbert and Gubar 73). Thus, Margery has to revise the polar system for women in the Church. Her foremothers
can provide inspiration but lack the necessary authority to grant her access to the religious niche she seeks.

The third and final aspect of Gilbert and Gubar’s thesis that applies in many ways to the tale of Margery Kempe is their idea of the “anxiety of authorship.” They argue, “the woman writer possesses what we have called ‘an anxiety of authorship,’ an anxiety built from complex and often only barely conscious fears of that authority which seems to the female artist to be by definition inappropriate to her sex” (Gilbert and Gubar 51). This concept is particularly applicable to Kempe, not only because she tries to create her own literary tradition and life story, but because she faces the additional challenge of passing her voice through the aid of a scribe. Because she can not physically wrest the pen from this man, she must make sure her story is told according to her truth and look to him for literary validation.

Gilbert and Gubar’s Victorian female writer must, “strive for true literary authority by simultaneously conforming to and subverting patriarchal literary standards” (73). Margery achieves this subversion by submitting to the masculine authority of her scribe, rather than challenge him in the composition of the Book. She realizes that her dictation will be altered in the process; her scribe writes in the Prologue, “Nevyrthelesse, he behyte hir that if he cowd redyn it he wolde copyn it owt and wrytyn it betyr wyth good wylle” (Kempe 19; emphasis mine). Margery realizes this and demonstrates how important he is to the progression of her narrative as she had “mech obloquie and slawndyr of this creatur that ther wold fewe men beleve this creatur” (21). The scribe’s copying and editing process seems on the surface to validate Margery’s narration as his distribution silently stamps the Book with his approval.

As Kempe learned in the search for a spiritual foremother, she cannot rely on another person to create her space or grant her autonomy. She desires true authority and will not be able to find a place in the Church by allowing another person, especially a man, to define what is acceptable. Though she accepts the necessity of the scribe to the composition of her story, she highlights and dictates the story to frame very specific episodes of her life that present as a holy, as autonomous, and yet subservient to the patriarchal control of the clergy. Thus, by manipulating her presentation, she creates this “middle ground” between angel and monster. She makes her character into someone that
is both autonomous and dependent on men as well as possessing feminine attributes in the “masculine” realm outside the home and outside of her wife and mother duties.

Here, Margery’s “anxiety of authorship” comes full circle and is inextricably linked with her liberating sense of physicality. Because the answer to her search lies in Margery’s sense of reversing the Church’s belief about women’s bodies, so her authorship anxiety is assuaged in the same manner. As she uses her body to feel Christ and experience Him in the way that male clerics cannot, she privileges this as her authority over them—as well as her Book. Her experience as Christ’s “blessed spouse” and handmaiden makes her unique and differentiated from any scribe, priest or mortal man. Her tears and her bodily asceticism give her true authorship over her life and its representation.

Throughout The Book of Margery Kempe, Margery goes through events that seem indicative of Gilbert and Gubar’s “madwoman.” From her postpartum madness to constant weeping to “feeling” Christ through the medium of her body, Margery has several episodes that shock a modern audience. Yet, it is precisely this “madness” that liberates Margery from the traditional polar roles that the Church ascribed her gender. Gaining control over her sexuality transfigures into her gaining autonomy over her voice and narrative abilities. Margery’s spiritual place and the answers she has sought lie in the liberation of her “monstrous” feminine flesh that can serve a greater purpose as a medium to God.
CHAPTER ONE
Flesh, Tears, and Physicality: The Importance of Corporeality in The Book of Margery Kempe

“Sche seyd with gret sorwe ‘Forsoth I had lever se yow be slayn than we schuld turne agen to owyr unclennesse.’ And he seyd agen, ‘Ye arn no good wyfe’” (35)

This exchange between Margery Kempe and her husband, John, demonstrates her Book’s theme of her own fear, discomfort and horror at sexuality and female flesh. Despite the fact that her work outwardly appears to be an informative treatise on her religious visions and relationship with Christ and the Virgin, she cannot divorce the biographical components of her pilgrimages from her awareness that the physical dominates many of her experiences. Despite medieval religious disgust with female corporeality, Margery cannot escape it, being that she is a married woman and the mother of fourteen children. Throughout the course of her story, Margery transforms from thinking of her flesh and sexuality as shameful to using them to experience religion physically in a way that male clerics can not. Her corporeality allows her to privilege herself in the Christian tradition so that she is no longer ostracized from the patriarchal medieval Church.

The view of sexuality in the Middle Ages was heavily influenced by the ideas and the Fathers of the Church and tended to be quite misogynistic. Saints within the Holy Tradition, like St. Augustine of Hippo, gave explanations about the status of women’s bodies and presence among men. St. Augustine particularly fit women into Gilbert and Gubar’s “angel in the house” mold, believing they should only concern themselves with their marital duties and obligations. He explicated this point describing what God wants women to do:

A woman is not able to hurl a spear or shoot an arrow, but she can grasp the distaff, weave at the loom; she correctly disposes of all such task that pertain to the household. She cannot express her opinion in a legislative assembly, but she can express it at home, and often is more shrewd about household matter s
than her husband. She cannot handle state business well, but she can raise children correctly. She provides complete security for her husband and frees him from all such household concerns. She takes care of all other matters this sort, that are neither fitting for her husband’s concern nor would they be satisfactorily accomplished should he ever lay his hand to them! (Augustine 37)

Though not directly anti-feminine, Augustine maintains the polarity of women’s existence. For him, “good” women remain inside the house and model themselves after the Blessed Virgin Mary. “Bad” women, on the other hand, are outside of the home, taking on traditionally male duties, and resemble Eve in her insubordination towards men’s authority. Augustine explains the dichotomy, “Our malady arose through the corrupted spirit of a woman; from the incorrupted flesh of a woman proceeded salvation” (Augustine 15). Augustine’s views weighed on the way in which the Church viewed women, particularly women like Margery who wished to step out of the house and into the realm of religion.

Virginity was obviously the most highly regarded state for women in the Church’s eyes. Using the Virgin as a model, it was believed that this state was the top rank of social positions for women. St. Jerome made a three-tiered model for females: they were wives, widows, or virgins. Though he recognizes the importance of all three roles to a functioning society, he lavishes special privilege on virgins in Epistle 22. He says, “Virgins begin to be on earth what others will be afterwards in Heaven. I praise marriage—but because they produce virgins. The gift of virginity pours forth more richly upon women, because it began with a woman” (Jerome 131–2). Presumably, Kempe saw society as something in which being a married wife would have been seen as less important and certainly more base than her virginal counterparts. She even apologizes to Christ in the course of her narrative, saying “lak of maydenhed is to me now gret sorwe” (Kempe 60).

According to Karma Lochrie, “female anatomy was thought to represent an inverse variation on the male anatomy [so that] the female sexual anatomy thus bore an ‘inverse variation’ or specularity with respect to male sexual physiology” (Lochrie 16). Women were seen as possessing men’s genitals, only on the inside, and that this
somehow made them a lesser species. This was simply one example of the physical components that were seen as divided based on gender. Margery’s religiously-based world was one in which sharp binaries existed. As Wendy Harding argues, “There were various dichotomous elements in late medieval society: the dominant and the marginalized, masculine and feminine, mind and body, clergy and laity, and written and oral modes of expression” (Harding 170). Kempe realizes that she is at the mercy of said divisions and that she must find her autonomy in a socially acceptable space.

Religion also influenced how medical science viewed the anomalies of the female body. Liz McAvoy explicates the ways in which learned men of science viewed the female form: “The female form was a site of ontological monstrosity. [The body was] a monstrous synecdoche for woman and her dangerous appetites [and in many] medical treatises, woman is represented as a vampiristic monster with a predilection for sucking out the life blood (that is to say, semen) from the male during sexual intercourse” (McAvoy 57). This view figuratively demonized women and their bodies so that women were reduced from thinking beings to only fleshly creatures dominated by their lust. Medieval women obviously had a huge stigma with which to cope while they remained trapped in the binding of sin and corruption that defined their flesh.

The making of women into actual, fleshly monsters was a by-product not only of a harshly misogynistic culture but also, as McAvoy suggests, of the views of males who were puzzled by the intricacies of the female body and terribly afraid that the “monster” would compromise their masculinity. She argues, “In her capacity as misconceived or ‘deformed’ male, woman occupied a highly problematic cultural space and frequently became translated in an expression of cultural monstrosity [and because of this] woman lacked the physical completeness and intellectual perfection of the rational male, resulting in physical deformity and moral weakness” (56). This view of the grotesque and other-worldly female form was particularly prevalent with the community of male clerics who felt that this monstrous phenomenon was the consequence of women’s natural sin that they had inherited from Eve.

Even though the male clergy often fell into a pattern of harsh misogyny and polar beliefs about women and their bodies, they were often appeared particularly
interested in women’s enigmatic spirituality. Ashton provides the example of Thomas Burgh who compiled a large feminine religious corpus in 1447 to a widely female audience in addition to male clergy. She argues, “Burgh’s natural Augustinian ideals are presented for a female audience ripe for his teaching. At the same time, he is obliged to balance his preaching against the fact of his patronage and ensure that he pleases the range of those, including men, who have commissioned his work” (Ashton 30). Ashton suggests that even though the male clergy appears interested in the lives of holy women, particularly saints, she believes their interest stems from their own masculine interests. She describes this model as “a dual one, typical of female hagiography, an imposed generic and explicit holy code plus an idealized femininity” (31). I agree with her premise, particularly throughout instances in The Book of Margery Kempe where her male clerics seem fascinated by what she does, yet terrified of the autonomy she gains. At the site of the Passion, “many men merveyled and wonderyd of the gret grace that God wrot in hys creatur. And therfor schamfully thei reprevyd hir and also cheyden hir” (Kempe 69-70).

This misogynistic account offers an explanation of why the Virgin Mary was often a literal cult figure among religious women. Being a virgin was the ultimate proof that a woman was not controlled by her flesh, not sexually lascivious, and thus could prove her holiness and closeness to God. Nuns, anchoresses, saints and other holy women could achieve such a status, and find a niche in the religious system. For them, it allowed them a “masculine” space to embody in the Church—they were differentiated from other women and of the holiest realm as St. Jerome and St. Augustine suggested. For women who did not fit such a category, such as Margery in her role as a wife and mother, there was an explicit role to remain subordinate in the hierarchical Church system. Virgins have the ability to escape the rule of a husband and have Christ as their only authority. As Dyan Elliot shows, the gospel of Paul “lays down a strict hierarchy of submission of Christ to God, man to Christ, woman to man and further insists that women keep silence in Church” (Elliot 21). The benefits of virginity were obviously not available to Kempe, so she must find another means to craft an empowered identity for herself in the Church. Because she technically is under the sexual control of her husband, she must attempt to gain a celibate or
“chaste” marriage as well as use her body to suffer for Christ. She chooses to use her body as a conduit to physically “feel” God and find her religious position.

Margery was not alone in the endeavor of using the body to feel closer to God and find a niche in the Church. Though Kempe is not on the same plane as anchoresses or nuns, Lochrie points out that most female visionaries and mystics used their flesh to experience the spiritual. She explains that the female flesh represented a “seal” from the outside world, one which kept its bearer bound and circumscribed to its implications (Lochrie 26-27). The mystic’s body becomes a text; “The body is both sight of the marvelous and spectacle of that remembrance through which the saint achieves mystical union” (Lochrie 36). Because women were assumed to have neither reason nor the mental faculty capable of achieving union with God, they had to use this cultural inscription of flesh to bridge their own path to acceptance within the religious system.

Margery begins to find a place in the system after her economic failures, when Christ comes to her one night in a vision and a sweet melody. She begins to fashion her body as the central focus of changing her lifestyle. She begins to desire a celibate, or chaste, marriage from her husband. She explains, “sche had nevyr desyr to komown fleschly with hyre husbonde, for the dette of matrimony was so abhoninabyl to hir that sche had levar, hir towt, etyn or drynkin the wose, the mukke in the chanel, than to consentyn to any fleschly comownyg saf only for obedyns” (Kempe 26). After such a bodily experience, she decides to fully submit to a religious lifestyle; thus, two overarching themes then come into her life: her desire for chastity and her tears of devotion. Both of these elements will scandalize her, will push her into the realm of the “monstrous woman,” and will cause concern as to the validity of her mystical experiences. She manipulates the societal standard with her loud weeping and desire for control of her married sexuality, so that she may transcend the dual polarity of angel and monster and carve a new niche of Christ’s servant, spouse and validated mystic.

At the forefront of Margery’s bodily anxiety lies her wifely duty of having sexual intercourse with her husband. In Chapter 22, she talks to Christ about her worries regarding her sexuality. She says, “A, Lord, maydonys dawnsyn now meryly in
hevyn. Schl not I don so? For becawse I am no mayden, lak of maydenhed is to me
now gret sorwe. I wold have fallyn in dyspery, and thu woldyst not suffer me.” [Christ
replies] “A, dowtyr, how oftyntymes have I teld the that thy synnes arn forgove the
and that we been onyd togedyr wythowtyn end? Thu art to me a synguler lofe, dowtyr,
and therfor I behote the thu schalt have a synguler grace in hevyn” (60).
Despite Christ’s assurances that He will love her even though she is not a maiden, her
sexual past causes her a great deal of anxiety and sorrow. She begs John to live in a
chaste marriage so that she may concentrate on a more holy existence. By medieval
social expectations, for Margery to refuse her marital duties would make her, as John
says, “no good wyfe” (35). Her resistance towards her expected “womanly” role
would have been seen (particularly by the male clerics) as more prideful and selfish
than her shortcomings in the business world had been.

The problem with Margery’s desire for a chaste marriage was the ambiguous
nature of how society viewed such an anomaly. The medieval clerics modeled their
view of married sexuality on Augustine’s view that it was a necessary component of
society and that it was part of God’s over all plan for humanity. It carved out the
religious hierarchy—the middle and lower classes married and procreated, the chaste
clergy remained closer to God (Elliot 45). Virginity and abstinence were particularly
problematic because they allowed women to achieve equal status to men and would
thus be seen as unfeminine (45-6). If Margery breaks her acceptable place in society as
wife and mother, she steps into the monstrous position and breaks the bonds of
medieval femininity. The place she seeks within the Church seems to be exclusively
male, and by trying to establish herself, she risks much public scrutiny. Yet, through
the aid of Christ, she realizes controlling her sexuality is the only way she can find a
way out from the polar duality of angel and monster.

Margery’s anxiety about her marital debt translates into a greater uneasiness
with any kind of sexual activity. Elliot points out that sex was still paramount in her
life saying, “For Margery Kempe, the conjugal debt was horrific and the supreme act
of penance. Margery’s response is of particular interest in that her revulsion to sex was
focused on the debt alone and, even after her conversion, she continued to be attracted
to other men. This seems to imply an unconscious awareness of the relation between
the debt and the husband’s authority” (228). I agree with Elliot’s premise here that by committing to a chaste marriage, Margery does not want to divorce herself from her sexuality. Rather, she wishes for control over her body, and authority in her marriage. Celibacy represents her control and autonomy over the patriarchy as well as her husband. By choosing to devote her life to Christ, she can act subservient to Him while retaining her authority as a person. She refuses to be the silent married woman in the Church that St. Paul outlined; rather, she can create her own tradition by not only controlling her flesh, but also mastering how she uses it and how it appears to the male clergy.

Because the story comes from Margery’s perspective, she casts her husband in a sexually lascivious light to her audience. When she argues for a chaste marriage, John will not submit, so Margery must call upon Christ to save her from committing this repulsive act. She details this episode in her narrative: “sche sayed, ‘Jhesus, help me,’ and he had no power to towche at that tyme in that wyse, ne nevyr aftyr with no fleschly knowyng” (35). By showing Christ’s presence in her life, Margery demonstrates her power to put her husband in the monstrous perspective so that she can step out of it. Because Margery’s flesh has already doomed her to be the Other, the monster alienated from God and consumed by sexual lust, she must work within this male mindset to break free of it. The tactic of manipulating the ideas of who and what is “monstrous” helps her in her Book to demarcate herself from her husband, her femininity and the world that wishes to keep her away from experiencing God.

Kempe’s discomfort with sexual intercourse would have been influenced both by the actual physical dangers of childbirth as well as the societal view that pregnancy made a woman very base and less close to God. The mortality rate for women in childbirth was quite high; Rachel Gilbert notes, “The chance of death during labor for the fifteenth century woman was 20% with 5% of infants dying at birth and another 10-12% dying within the first year” (Gilbert www.msnu.edu/history). Surely Kempe would have realized that every pregnancy might be her last. This fear would have inherently related sexual intercourse and pregnancy to death which surely would have factored into Margery’s anxieties about it.
Gilbert and Gubar explicate the idea that the male anxiety about childbirth directly correlates to their idea about how women are pushed into dual roles. In their view, pregnancy was a depersonalizing state that women were biologically bound to this destiny. They argue that the womb has always been a site of a “mythic paradise” (88) and thus represented the unattainable venue for men and an imprisoning factor for women. The Church ideology was that women stood as merely a space for children to grow in is further demonstrated by Karma Lochrie. Men were seen as the spiritual component of humanity, and women were seen as the weak, frail corporeal nature.

During pregnancy, women simply housed the growing embryo; men gave it a soul and “form” (22-24). Elizabeth Robertson explains St. Jerome’s views on the matter. He says, “As long as woman is for birth and children, she is different from a man as body is from soul. But if she wishes to serve Christ more than the world, the she will cease to be a woman and will be called a man” (Robertson 148) This was another way that the Church attributed women to something fleshly and base, devoid of mental and rational contribution. As long as Margery keeps bearing children, she will be forever trapped in angel role of the feminine. To find a religious space, she must reverse Jerome’s ideology to show how powerfully spiritual maternity could be.

Still, on the surface level, multiple pregnancies would have hindered Kempe’s quest for spiritual autonomy and the place within the Church. For her, being pregnant was indeed a very real and debilitating condition that she suffered over and over again because of her married obligation. As the mother of fourteen, Margery spent most of her time between ages 20 and 40 with child. Even though pregnancy was just another male mystery and a physical horror for men, Margery uses it as another outlet to emphasize physicality. Yet, the emphasis is often subtle as this prominent “monstrous” condition as Margery is decidedly fearful of it taking away from her mystical experience.

Childbirth frames the outline for Kempe’s entire Book. As she explains in her first chapter, “what for labowr sche had in chyldyng and for sekenesse goyng befor, sche despered for hyr lyfe, wenynge sche mygth not levyn. Sche had a thyng in conseycens which sche had nevyr schewayd befor that tyme in alle hyr lyfe” (21). Margery, in what modern researchers have described a post-partum psychotic episode,
suffers the agony of being silenced by her confessor after such a traumatic bodily episode. She despairs that she might die, so she juxtaposes her childbirth bed and deathbed so that the two become interchangeable. She seems to blame the act of childbirth for this silence as much as she does the confessor himself. After this episode, Margery portrays pregnancy as something debilitating and the thing which stands between her and her religious goals. Yet, even though she chooses to show the horrific sides of childbearing, it remains an important link to her own corporeality, so that pregnancy in and of itself represents something positive and negative.

In the flashback Chapter 21, Margery recounts when she found she was pregnant, presumably with her fourteenth child. She recalls, “In the tyme that this creatur had revelacyons, owyr Lord seyd to hir, ‘Dowtyr thow art wyth childe.’ Sche seyd agen, ‘A, Lord, how schal I than do for kepyng of my chylde?’ Owir Lord seyd, ‘Dowtyr, dred the not, I schal ordeyn for an kepar.’ ‘Lord, I am not worthy to heryn the spekyn and thus to comown wyth myn husband. Nerthelesse it is to me gret peyn and dysese’” (58-9). Here, Margery seems distraught, and the discovery of being with child reemphasizes the shame and horror of sexuality. Her “monstrous” body stands to ruin her mystical revelations, and this highlights why a chaste marriage seems especially important if she is going to be a bride of God.

Because her Book is out of chronological order, it is hard for modern scholarship to place when exactly this pregnancy occurred. Laura Howes points to the idea that Margery may have conceived when she lacked control over her sexuality and body. She postulates, “It is possible that her husband did not at first honor their chastity agreement” (Howes 221). The pregnancy is an outward expression of the lack of control she has over her body, whether it is the consequence of her husband’s actions or her own weak-willed temptation that she outlined in Chapter 5. Yet, she manages to strengthen this monstrous abomination by manipulating the circumstances to emphasize the positive physical aspect that strengthen her mystical union.

Before she can try to both pass over the birth while still emphasizing motherhood and corporeality, the modern reader must grapple with the reason why Kempe chooses not to explicate the pregnancy, birth or condition of the child. Howes states, “Margery’s silence about the birth seems odd, especially in light of the
importance accorded to the birth of her first child in the first chapter of her Book. It could be argued that Margery’s central concern is with events relating to her spiritual life” (222-3). She maintains that Margery voraciously separates the physical from the spiritual, and thus her last child remains a mystery. While she might maintain a valid point, it seems that indeed, Margery puts so much emphasis on her physicality as a way of spirituality that, while she does not choose to detail the events of the particular pregnancy, she uses other tactics to emphasize sexuality and the importance of motherhood.

For instance, Margery emphasizes the importance the motherliness of the Virgin Mary in her vision of being the handmaiden to St. Anne. Here, she assumes a mother-type role to the Virgin: “Also sche beggyd owyr Lady to lyg in wyth hir blyssd sone. And sythen sche bedggyd mete for owyr Lady and hir blyssded child. Aftyrward sche swaythyd hym wyth byttyr teerys of compassion”(33). She not only witnesses the miracle of His birth, but in a way puts herself in the position of the Holy Mother to the savior of the world. She uses her tears, which become her most prominent physical differentiation from the secular world throughout her narrative, to find another way to experience Christ. Here, Kempe equates the physical presence of her weeping with the ultimate spiritual act for God. Her crying emphasizes her physicality in many instances of her Book, and this particular episode, she uses them to be a vehicle for maternity. They provide a bridge in which she can identify herself with the Blessed Virgin Mary and Christ Himself. She feels this connection with Christ and His Family when she says, “Lord, I schal fare fayr wyth yow” (33).

Margery continues to emulate the Virgin and also steps into the role of female confessor towards the end of her first book. Because her male confessor denied her the opportunity at the beginning of her book to confess in postpartum madness, she takes on a quasi-clerical role in Chapter 75 where she comforts a woman who was “owt of hir mende” (170). With daily visits and her acts of comfort, Margery eventually alleviates the mad woman’s symptoms: “And the sayd creatur preyid for this woman owr Lord answerydin hir sowle and seyd, ‘Sche schulde faryn ryth wel.’” (171). Here, Margery fully employs the dual role of angel and monster, male and female, in control and yet subservient. She acts as an angel figure to the sick woman, just like the Virgin
or Mary Magdalene; she has taken on the “male” role both out of the house and as a religious authority. Yet, she makes it decidedly feminine by adding her own experience as a mother and a mystical, religious figure. She is subservient to the male figure of Christ, but the audience is fully capable of seeing how Margery has made herself a pseudo-Virgin Mary figure and makes sure that she has carved her own niche in the religious tradition, using her maternity as a vehicle to do so.

Margery shows another type of mothering and emulation of the traditional “angel-woman” when her husband becomes an invalid. This episode demonstrates that she has gained control over both of their sexualities and of the marriage. Amidst the public outcries that his death would be because of her pilgrimages and essentially being a “bad wife,” she asks Christ what she must do for her feeble partner. Jesus tells her, “‘Yys, dowtyr,’ seyd owr Lord, ‘Thu schalt have as meche mede for to kepyn hym and helpyn hym in hys need at hom as yyf thu wer in chirche to makyn thi preyerys. And thu hast seyd many tymys that thu woldist fawy kepyn me’” (Staley 173). He demonstrates that Margery must continue to do more “womanly” acts and treat her earthly husband just as she treats her spiritual one. Just as she nursed Mary and Jesus, and served St. Anne, so she must continue the role of a savior type of woman, or continue to act as the perfect Holy mother.

Besides mimicking Mary and showing what a good, caring figure she can be, her adoption of the role of the motherly nurse reveals additional ways in which she physically suffers for Christ’s love and approval. She bears the duties and discomfort of her husband’s being, “as a childe” who “voydyd his natural digestion in hys lynyn clothes” causing her to perform, “hir labowr meche the mor in waschyng and wryngyng” this situation “lettyd hir ful meche fro hir contemplacyon” (173). She diapers and cleans up after her husband, presumably as she would have done for a baby (perhaps the mystery fourteenth child). She makes it her “motherly” duty to care for him “as sche wolde a don Crist hymself” (173).

The most important aspect of John Kempe’s feeble sickness is how perfectly it coincides with Margery’s manipulation of reversing the monster-role. She has tried to switch the angel and monster position, so that the horrifying physical aspects of femininity like motherhood make her an ideal model and make the ideal man the
monstrous entity. McAvoy points out that the idea of the monstrous woman, “concretize(d) perennial male fears concerning castration and consumption at the hands (or, more precisely, the genitalia) of women” (McAvoy 57). Here, Margery has succeeded in the endeavor to “castrate” her husband. She has denied him sex, and now she has all the power over him in his feeble and uncontrolled (or incontinent) state. She thus privileges the power of the mother figure and the control that her flesh and power of maternity have over him. Despite her level of authority, she still submits to good womanly, particularly motherly roles so that this power is socially acceptable as well.

So, while Margery never makes the birth of her last child an explicit part of her narrative, maternity is an overwhelming component to her views on her body, her physical nature and her role as a religious nurturer. She makes the bodily components of child-bearing an overarching theme of her physical conversion and mysticism just as the Virgin made her body the same. She realizes she can never escape the bounds of her female flesh, so she must turn something as inescapable and problematic as pregnancy to her advantage. After she devises a tactic for maternity, she must manipulate her audience to understand the other physical ways that she experiences her mystical visions.

In her desire to make herself not monstrous and to appear as a good woman to society, Margery must explore the corporeal act of asceticism, including abstinence, imitatio Christi, and affective piety, or suffering as Christ did to fully understand His pain, as her first attempt to know God and to battle her bodily anxiety. All of the former tactics allow Margery to express her religiosity in a way that will fully utilize her body and bring her closer to Christ. Because she will feel as he did while suffering for her sins and for His love, Kempe will justify some of the Church’s horrors towards female flesh. Gail Ashton explains, “Through its gaps and orifices, the female body articulates its own unique experience. It is through the hagiographical text’s very focus upon the violence of the tortured female body, upon breast, blood, and other fluid that the female saint speaks herself and declares her own identity as a saint and a woman” (Ashton 140). Women must use the “freakish” nature of their flesh to feel as Christ did. Margery employs ascetic violence on her body to suffer both for Christ and as He
did. Bodily punishment for Christ proves her devotion to becoming holy; suffering as he did allows her to bond a bridge and connect with Him. Her desire to abstain from sex merely begins the way that she will punish her lascivious flesh and eventually transforms into a celibate lifestyle choice like her clerical counterparts. She must fully submit to escaping from her bodily sinfulness by first recognizing that her flesh is an entity which she must endure and use to her spiritual advantage. As the Church dictated that she could not know God for lack of reason, she feels that by performing numerous acts of “bodlye penawnce” (25), she will find her true religious path.

Women’s asceticism in the Middle Ages crosses over many boundaries, especially for Kempe who used penance as both a punishment to her body and liberation from the patriarchal system of the Church. Bynum has argued that the self-inflicted sicknesses as well as real physical maladies were tropes of suffering used almost exclusively by women as a religious experience. She says, “Illness was more likely to be described as something ‘to be endured’ when it happened to women” (189). She notes that after the twelfth century, the suffering of the body was understood as an opportunity for women to get closer to Christ and these instances included, “bizarre bodily occurrences [such as] stigmata, incorruptibility of the cadaver in death, mystical lactations and pregnancies, catatonic trances, ecstatic nosebleeds, miraculous anorexia, eating and drinking pus, visions of bleeding hosts” (194). Margery employs several of these tactics to emphasize her own fleshly humanity along with Christ’s.

Gilbert and Gubar also explicate that marginalized women in society endure illness, both real and imagined, so much so that it becomes an essential part of femininity. Conditions such as hysteria, self-starvation, and madness are symptomatic of socially-trapped women so much so that it becomes natural (54-55). They write, “It is debilitating to be any woman in a society where women are warned that if they do not behave like angels than they must be monsters. There are ways in which patriarchal socialization literally makes women sick, both physically and mentally” (53). These illnesses often lead to premature death, and women had the choice either to give away to these sicknesses or to stand up against them and leave the social norms of femininity. Margery faces a society that wishes for her to be this silent, dying
woman. They expect her to be frail, trapped within the confines of the house, and probably fading early due to her multiple pregnancies and the illness that was inherently associated with women. Yet, she tries to control the ascetic behaviors and frame them in a way that she can prove she still suffers for spirituality, though not in a fashion that indicates a premature death. By embracing her physicality, and acknowledging the monstrous feminine flesh, she can effectively use it to serve her greater religious purpose of finding a space within the Church.

She begins with the simpler and more obvious ascetic acts like fasting, abstaining from sex and wearing a hair shirt as penance. However, as her devotion becomes more prominent in her life, her ascetic treatment of her body does as well. This treatment that appears to a modern reader to be a type of punishment for being trapped in the boundaries of a type of corporeality that dictated women’s spiritual status as lesser and more base than their male counterpart. Yet, for a medieval woman, to suffer in the bounds that defined femininity would have been empowering and a demonstration of Christ’s love as well as their special status in the religious hierarchy. To demonstrate the fact that she remains outside of this fleshly realm, though restricted within its boundaries, she must show her religiosity in a physical way. Her devotion must be demonstrated in an affective way, and thus her piety ties into the condition of her flesh.

Her asceticism for religious purposes extends as she details how many years of her devotion were filled with excruciating physical pain and penance. She explains her eight years of suffering: “Affyrward God ponyschyed hir wyth many gret and divers sekenes. Sche had the flyx a long tyme tyl sche was anoyntyd, wenyng to a be deed. Sche was so febyl that sche myth not heldyn a spon in hir hand” (136). It seems, despite her devotions and standing firm in the face of public criticism, Christ makes her suffer even more. The modern reader must step back and analyze who punishes whom in this account—is this really Divine physical intervention or Margery’s own desire to keep the torture of her monstrous female flesh going?

One of the most physical components of Kempe’s devotion, as well as her practice of affective piety, lies in her reliance on the Eucharist. Her bodily devotion to the Eucharist represents one component of how Margery employs a traditional
mystical tactic to imitate other holy women and “feel” Christ. She describes an episode where upon taking communion went from a religious task to a bodily experience:

On a day as this creatur was heryng messe, a yong man and a good prest heldyng up the sacrament in hys handys ovyr hys hed, the sacrament schok and flekyrd to and fro as a dowe flekeryth wyth hir wengys. And whan he held up the chalys wyth the precyows sacrament, the clays mevyd to and fro as it schul a fallyn owt of hys handys. When the sacre was don, this creatur had gret merveyle of the steryng and mevyng of the blyssed sacrament, desiring to se more sacreys and lokyng yf it would do so agen (57)

Here, Margery demonstrates how important the physical and mystical portion of Christ’s body through transubstantiation was and how holy women desire it in every way possible. The host, in effect, becomes another entity to emphasize the fleshliness of religious experience for women.

Part of the importance of the Eucharist particularly to female mystics is the reasoning on the part of what it was and what it represented. It was Christ’s body and blood; as Bynum explains it represented Christ’s love. She points out “Christ’s humanity was thought of as flesh, as food (corpus, caro, carnis) eaten in the Eucharist, a substitute for the meat many women denied themselves in long fasts” (Bynum 130). Margery started the tale of her Book with denying herself the “fleshly pleasures” primarily eating meat, much to the chagrin of her husband. After she witnesses the episode with the moving host, Christ denies her the privilege of watching the miracle, “Then seyd owyr Lord Jhesu Crist to the creatur, ‘Thow schalt no mor sen it in this maner, therfor than God that thow hast seyn’” (58). This episode seems to make the host a desirable object, similar to the way lust and sexuality were perceived. It is another aspect taken away so that she can continue the ascetic life to suffer for her God.

Yet, the importance of transubstantiation in Eucharistic devotion cannot be underestimated, even for Margery. It not only enables a mystic to feel Christ but in effect become him as well. It allows them to transcend their “confining” physical flesh
and allow for a religious experience. As Bynum points out, “The Eucharist is an especially appropriate vehicle for the effort to become Christ because the Eucharist is Christ. The fact of transubstantiation is crucial. One becomes Christ’s crucified body in eating Christ’s crucified body” (146). Margery needs this kind of physical affirmation so that she can ‘feel’ Christ and literally be a part of him (or rather, he can be a part of her). Just as she placed herself in religious episodes to be with Christ, she uses the Eucharist as a vehicle to transcend the boundaries of traditional femininity and effectively carve her niche within the Church.

Bynum describes how the host was seen to impregnate those who swallowed it. She argues that holy women were often seen as “carrying” Christ and that mystical pregnancies were common, especially among the female visionaries (146-7). For a community of women who were often anchoresses, nuns or led otherwise celibate lives, this religious pregnancy would have been the closest outlet they could have experienced to the reproductive tendencies of their married female counterparts. For Margery, this decidedly feminine aspect of Eucharistic devotion would give her something to directly relate to unlike her virgin counterparts. Because she was probably pregnant with her fourteenth child in the midst of her mystical devotions, she could correlate what was actually happening to her body with a mystical pregnancy. Christ’s assurances of love and support during this state probably would have further implicated Margery’s exalted spiritual status and the importance of her maternity. Jesus says to her in Chapter 35, “Be this tokyn, dowtyr, beleve it is God that spekyth in the, for wherso God is hevyn is, and wher that God is ther be many awngelys, and God is in the and thu art in hym” (Kempe 93; emphasis mine). Here, Kempe frames her narrative explicit that Christ is in her, and a mystical or real pregnancy would have only made this spiritual idea quite literal within the confines of her body. She could surpass other devotees of the Eucharist and actually be pregnant rather than just imagining it.

One of Margery’s most bodily devotional practices that is wholly consistent throughout the narrative is her loud, boisterous weeping. One example of simply how physical these tears could be seen is on her holy travels. On her pilgrimage to Jerusalem, Margery does not merely imagine witnessing the Passion. Rather, she
experiences it. Describing her visit to Calvary, she writes that when she came to the site of the Passion, “Ther cryed sche and wept wythowetyyn mesur that sche myth not restreyn hirself” (78). Her sobbing represents much more than just a traditional feminine reaction to horror and suffering. She does not merely empathize for Christ, but rather she must experience pain as only He did. She desires to feel “compassion” for Christ’s sacrifice and to her, the only outlet available is to suffer physically so that by being ascetic, and using her flesh as a conduit so that she may become as Christ was in earthly form.

Margery’s weeping and loud wailing attracted much attention from clerics and other pilgrims, both positive and negative. She shatters the stereotype of the silent or good woman and makes her crying heard loudly among her critical public. They begin in Chapter 3 when she hears the heavenly melody. This episode inspires her so much that she desires find her spiritual path and connect with Christ. She does so by employing a physical connection, most often, her tears. Crying differentiates her path of mysticism throughout her pilgrimages and provides corporeal access to Christ. It allows her to feel empathy for Biblical episodes. A clear example of this occurs on her pilgrimage to Jerusalem when her crying comes under criticism from her fellow travelers: “And thei wer most dislesyd for sche wepyd so mech and spak alwey of the lofe and goodness of owyr Lord as wel at the tabyl as in other place. And therfor schamfully thei repryved hir and alto chedyn hir and seyden thei wold not suffren hir as hir husband dede when sche was at hom an Inglond” (70). Here, her companions place her in the position of an unfeminine woman. She is out of the home, away from her wifely and motherly duties, and her tears serve as mere proof that she lacks the strength and stability to be a pilgrim of God.

Despite the fact that Kempe’s tears are a physical outlet for access to Christ, they still remain very problematic to her reputation, especially among the clergy. Margery’s tears bring her into another bout of trouble even when she is at home. She recounts this episode in Lynn: “Than the same doctowr went to an other doctowr of divinite which was assigned to prechyn in the parisch cherche before al the pepil, prayng hem that yf the sayd creatur cryid er wept at hys sermown that he wolde syffyr it meekly and no thing ben abaschyd therof ne not spekyn ther ageyns” (160). Just as
the opening episode with her confessor, another clerical man tries once again to silence her, control her, and quiet these outbursts that society deems inappropriate and unfeminine. Yet Margery maintains the tears and keeps crying as they are a source of power, despite their enigmatic qualities. Jenkins notes that the tears are significant to the mystical tradition as a whole:

The most intriguing aspect of Kempe’s life, therefore, concerns her loud unspeakable” groanings and cryings, her groaning “too deep for words” (as St. Paul describes them) which are beyond discourse. Kempe can neither explain them nor prevent these manifestations and her inability to verbalize or textualize her experiences causes her great anxiety. The more she attempts to repress her groans and cries the more forcefully they appear. (Jenkins 249)

Her tears are a grip of power, one she cannot fully harbor or explain, but yet an undeniable physical “proof” that she is important in God’s scheme, despite her disapproving public.

Her tears also serve to demarcate her from the general public, and, more importantly, to establish her feminine bodily traits as truly mystical, as belonging to a realm that men could not touch. Her tears upset the male populace who surrounds her. When she is at her the shrine in Canterbury, her tale shows how she threatens the masculine nature of the clergy: “On a tyme, as this creatur was at Cawntyrbery among the monkys, sche was gretly despised and reprevyd for cawse sche wept so fast bothyn of the monkys and prestys and of seculer men. Than a yong monke seyde to this creatur, ‘Eythyr thow hast the Holy Gost or ellys thow hast a devyl within the’” (Kempe 40-41). Margery again makes a spectacle of herself, and while the criticism from the men seems negative, the publicity of her crying is Margery’s way of excluding the men who see her body (and bodily functions) as monstrous. By being mysterious to men, she privileges her flesh and physical functions in a realm that the male clergy can not touch. Her episode in Canterbury, though horrifying to the young and inexperienced monk, gains Margery the autonomous voice to preach God’s word and establish herself among her religious counterparts. Her success is seen when the
older monk says to the men standing around her “Late hir sey what sche wyl” (41). This grants her the ability to have a voice and establish her own agenda.

Margery’s liberation through her tears is a personal triumph, though a problematic one for the stigma it carries. More than possible religious controversy, her tears effectively render the men unable to control her. They give her an autonomous or anti-feminine position, out of the house and in the public eye causing a disturbance. McAvoy insights the true problem for the men—Margery is metaphorically castrating the male privilege of power. Kempe’s tears are so difficult for the clergy to understand, that they remain helpless in the rational understanding of her actions. Thus, Kempe takes away the male power, leaving the clergy in a futile state, or one in which they lack generative power, often described in terms of a phallus. McAvoy explains, “Her weeping was a stereotypical feminine trait. Julian of Norwich positions Margery and her tears alongside God in binary opposition to this devil, in effect reasserting the power of the feminine to keep at bay the dangerous masculinity embodied by this monstrous manifestation of evil” (McAvoy 64). She points out how Margery manipulates the direction of her Book to reverse the social norms and clerical privilege. Though the men are horrified by Margery, she positions them so that they look like the ones who are unable to be close to God. This ignorance is the reason that they can not understand why she weeps as often and boisterously as she does. Her tears are a feminine or “monstrous” gift that moves her ahead of them in the spiritual path to feel closer to Christ.

Margery’s boisterous weeping also serves as a path to the feminine mystical tradition. Her tears are a part of her performance as a holy woman; they are a way for her to suffer for Christ and to be among the tradition of women who have wept for him, including the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene. Carolyn Dinshaw has argued that Margery’s weeping correlates directly with her fascination with Mary Magdalene and desire to imitate her. “In Jerusalem she stood on the very spot where Mary Magdalene stood when Christ asked her, ‘Mary, why wepyst thou?’ The final writing of her Book was begun on the day after Mary Magdalene’s Day” (Dinshaw 163). Margery wants so much to be holy, she uses her body and her tears to place herself alongside Christianity’s most revered women. As the next chapter demonstrates, the
legend and theatrical renditions of Mary Magdalene will play an important part to Margery’s inspiration and framing of her narrative. She associates Magdalene with a holy woman who also depended on her corporeality to define her niche in the realm of spirituality. Thus, Margery’s emphasis on her body serves to explain how important physicality is to spiritual women.

Among all the expressions of bodily penance, expression and experiences, Margery’s abilities to use her voice and feel the world around her are her greatest attributes to the mystical tradition. She begins her narrative in two types of pain: she has gone “mad” from the delivery of her child and bites and tears at her flesh; meanwhile, she desires most of all to speak, to break the silence that is attributed to angel-women and experience God. This feeling of God is to find a place physically and allow her voice to be heard, and to get her message across so that she may find that place in the tradition she has been desperately seeking.

Her public outcries and explicit challenges to authority seem specifically to carve a unique niche for her even more than they did for her spiritual precursors. Her sexuality is abhorrent, her childbearing is problematic and her tears are simply scandalous, but the fact that she lets her voice out makes her different from everyone else. Dinshaw argues, “Answering back functions in this context of bodily disjunctions in a particularly queer way. It is her key rhetorical strategy” (152). Her ability to stand up in the face of her confessors and critics gives her a voice that enables her to continue changing the roles to take herself out the “monster” space and into a holy one.

Her voice becomes more prominent as she becomes more comfortable in her position as a mystic. She has outward expressions such as crying, weeping and “madness” to define her feelings even at the very beginning of the book, but as her narrative moves on, she becomes confident in speaking up to the male clerics that wish to confine her. In the confrontation she experiences at Leicester, she confidently puts aside the issues of her flesh, and her debilitating femininity to answer back to their questions:

And so sche answeryd forth to all the articles as many as thei wolde askyn hir that wer wel plesyd. The meyr, which was hir dedly enmy, he seyd, ‘In
faith, sche menyth not wyth hir hert as sche seyth with her mowthe’. And the clerkys seyden to hym, ‘Sir, sche answeryth ryth wel to us.’ (Kempe 117)

The male clerics have trouble processing a woman who is not only out of the house, but speaking back to them, and showcasing a type of mystical intellect that was uncharacteristically feminine. Like her tears, Margery’s boldness in speaking out and having her voice heard also metaphorically emasculates the male clergy. By challenging their authority, she transfers the attention and power to herself. Her being in this spotlight seemingly makes the clergy uneasy and in the more feminine position. They find her actions and persona so enigmatic, they tell her to go to the Bishop of Lincoln to receive his approval to validate her actions because they can not.

Kempe’s ability to speak up and lash back at the male clerics serves to justify her experience to her reading audience as well as the contemporaries she that surround her. Lochrie argues that her bodily utterance transcends to the text: “Kempe’s voice ‘speaks between’ the written antifeminist tradition and the written text of her own life, locating divergent locution, and hence true authority, in the place where she—and not the written text—is. True authority is always displaced elsewhere than the written text or textual tradition” (Lochrie 113). Her voice—her bodily function—goes beyond the words on the page. Being that she is distanced from these words because a scribe is the one writing them down, her bodily connections that she has used, especially her answering back are what allows her to find her own tradition.

All of the corporeal aspects of mysticism are important to Margery’s Book. Being limited by “monstrous” female flesh, she must find a way to manipulate her restricted situation, reverse the norms of male and female and create a middle where she can be apart of the tradition yet succinct from it. Her flesh is both binding and liberating—the corporeality she emphasizes in her pilgrimage puts her in the position of being limited, yet she manipulates it so that it makes her different from men and more powerful. She assumes their role, and because they are so dumbfounded with her wild bodily antics, she finds the place in the Church that she desired all along.
CHAPTER TWO
Searching for Our Literary Foremothers: The Didactic Purpose of The Book of Margery Kempe and the Influence of Medieval Drama

"It is accurate to say that Margery Kempe of Lynn possessed an unswerving sense of devotional theatre and that she embraced her martyrdoms deliberately and self-consciously" (Gibson 47)

Modern scholarship has no written proof that Margery Kempe ever saw any of the mystery or saints’ plays that were performed throughout England and that were intended to teach their audience important Biblical lessons, Christian values and social norms. However, the theatre was particularly prevalent in East Anglia, the region from which Margery hails, and plays were performed quite often for the teaching and entertainment of the townspeople. From the structure and tone of Margery’s Book, we can see striking similarities between her story and medieval drama in both the presentation and didactic purpose of her writing. The Digby Mary Magdalene play provides one of the clearest examples of such parallels in purpose; additionally, we know that Margery was influenced by the legend of St. Mary Magdalene, the repentant whore, and this thematic scheme finds it way into her narrative. Margery searches for her religious and literary “foremothers” (to borrow the term that Gilbert and Gubar coined) in both religious lore and their dramatic representations; she is drawn towards the female saints, particularly Mary Magdalene. Christ even says to her in the course of narrative, “Dowtyr thow hast despised thiself, therfor thow schalt nevyr be despised of God. Have mend, dowtyr, what Mary Mawdelyn was, Mary Eypeyan, Seynt Powyl, and many other seynts that are now in hevyn” (Kempe 59). Besides being like Mary Magdalene, Margery looks to real-life female mystics like Julian of Norwich and Bridget of Sweden for inspiration and finding a place within the feminine religious tradition.. Sadly, while the meetings and writings of other holy women offer inspiration, she must turn only to God to be the true voice of authorization in her work.
I have previously argued that Gilbert and Gubar’s theses about the nineteenth century woman writer are applicable to Kempe’s narrative. This is also true for Margery’s desire for social acceptance and validation. They claim that all women writers feel a certain “madness,” a compulsory urge to make sense of their freakish desire for personal and literary autonomy, particularly when it comes to penning their own work. Even though Margery is not the actual person holding the pen to author her texts, she harbors much anxiety about her validity nonetheless. She fears her work will be scorned, abhorred or worst of all, ignored completely. Even the scribe who writes her Preface echoes her fears. He writes, “For ther was so mech obloquie and slawndyr of this creatur that ther wold fewe men beleve this creatur” (Kempe 21). In her view, she had been so scandalous and employed such unusual tactics in her lifetime, that her general public must ponder whether or not she is truly holy or simply another “mad woman,” to use Gilbert and Gubar’s phrase. From the very beginning of her text, she must show her audience that while she may be controversial, her religious position is that of a true visionary and mystic.

The hypothesis underpinning Gilbert and Gubar’s anxiety of authorship lies in the idea that for women to not feel so afraid of explicating their own work, they must seek an example or a “literary foremother.” Seeking this person would supposedly strengthen the community of female writers and as well as validate their experience. It would fill the presumed emptiness of the woman writer’s mind and allow her to break free of the “prison in the vaporous Cave of Spleen” (Gilbert and Gubar 94-5) – that is, a woman’s creative desire to express herself that is often denied to her. This is particularly problematic for Kempe who does not have a community of feminine writers because women did not pen their own texts. Holy women dictated their lives and experiences to a male scribe whom they trusted. The details and implications of this phenomenon will be explored in the next chapter, but in terms of needing a precursor, Margery looks to other female mystics as inspiration from a religious and authorial view. They imply that women need this community to become authors because the patriarchal system of male writers implies that the pen is masculine or “phallic.” A woman who wants to step into this male-dominated arena
would be seen as unfeminine, as the monster on the polar opposite of the good domesticated angel.

For Margery Kempe, this problematic wish to express her religious visions and thoughts seems only to further the idea that she is the anti-feminine monster. She has already faced harsh criticism and societal shock for her emphasis on corporeality as well as her sexuality. Her desire to step into a male-dominated realm of author makes her both unconventional and threatening to the patriarchal bonds of society and religion. For Kempe, being in this grey area between angel and monster and good and bad woman, demonstrates her anxiety about her relationship to the institutionalized Catholic Church. She is not like the saints nor does she submit to the model of conduct provided by the Virgin Mary. Thus, she seems most afraid of being ostracized from the mystical, religious tradition.

This anxiousness in her real life seeps into her narrative and the character she fashions for her persona. The textual “creatur” of Margery must seek validation for her actions and visions; she needs to be able to prove that she is genuine and acceptable to the religious community. Indeed, she has episodes in which male clerics do approve of her and find her inspirational. While she waits in Bristol to leave for another pilgrimage, the Bishop of Worcester approves of her after she rebukes his men. She recounts, “At the last sche toke hir leve of hym, and he gaf hir golde and hys blyssyng and comawndyd hys mene to lede hir forth in hir wey. And also he preyd hir whan sche come fro Seynt Jamys ageyn that sche wold come unto hym.” (Kempe 112). However, the approval of some of the male clerics does not necessarily fit her with a niche in the Church and they certainly do not validate her as a mystic. For the latter, she seeks the aid of her feminine predecessors for approval of her writing and her experience.

She finds this female outlet by visiting Julian of Norwich for a real woman with whom she can relate. Also, by demonstrating the influence that the legend, and presumably theatrical performance, of The Mary Magdalene play provided for her, she tries to negate that “bad woman” image and show that she and the saint have much in common. Both of these figures serve as the foremothers she seeks. Yet, her
relationship to them becomes ambivalent as she desires to become better than them
given her social position and to perform the tasks they could not do.

Before Kempe can seek out the aid of Julian of Norwich to satiate her need
for another female mystic to accept her, she must first follow Christ’s orders and
demands. Rather than telling her to look for a female contemporary, he first sends her
on a mission that leaves her dependent on the male clerics that are the predominant
source of her anxieties. In chapter five, prior to her visit to Julian, Christ tells her,
“And I byd the gone to the ankyr at the Frer Prechowrys, and schew hym my prevytyts
and my cownselys which I schewe to the, and werk afyr hys cownsel, for my spyrit
schal speke in hym to the” (31). This episode subtly reinforces Kempe’s own
powerlessness regarding her femininity. She must submit herself not only to Christ’s
masculine authority but also to a male cleric for validation as to her authority. Even
though this cleric gives her some credence for her to seek out her path as a visionary,
she still lacks autonomy. Hence, the masculine personification of Christ governs the
whole experience, not Margery’s own intuitions or character.

Margery’s visit with Dame Julian proves to be the easiest task in seeking a
“motherly precursor” to ease her doubts about her visions of Christ and new religious
status in life. She describes the encounter in Chapter 18:

And so sche dede and schewyd hir the grace that God put in hir sowle of
compunccyon, contricyon, swetnesse and devocyon, compassion with holy
meditaeyon and hy comtemplacyon, and ful many holy spechys and
dalywans that owyr Lord spak to hir sowle, and many wonderful revelacyons.
The ankres, heryng the mervel oyows goodness of owyr Lord, hyly thankyd
God wity al hir hert for hys vistacyon, cownselyng this creatur to be obedient
to the wyl of owyr Lord God and flufyllyn with al hir myghtys whatevyr he
put in hir sowle. (53)

Margery finds herself quite placated, perhaps even inspired with this visit. Yet, it
provides her merely a comfort, not necessarily the hope, or validation, she was looking
for. Despite Julian’s blessing, and reassurance that her tears were a gift from God,
Kempe still seems to be unresolved. Julian is still only one woman who gives Margery
a positive nod. She still faces an entire society that wishes to see her fail because she has stepped outside of her feminine boundaries.

Religious men in Margery’s society still see her as the Other, an outsider who merely causes trouble. She recounts this in her narrative when she explains how the male clergy are afraid she will, “turnyn and not kepyn hir perfeccyon. Sche had many enmys and so mech slawndyr that hem semyd sche myte not beryn it wythowt gret grace” (54). Here, Margery realizes that even though Julian appears to side with her and the purpose of her becoming a pilgrim and mystic, she can never be in the same place as the anchoress. The men in society will always believe the slanderous words that have been said about her, and always view her as a threat to masculine authority.

The real Margery, as well as her third person “creatur,” had to battle the inevitable truth. She tried to model herself on Julian, but the fact remained that she and the virgin holy woman were in different spectrums of the religious universe. Julian was an anchoress and a virgin—one who has dedicated herself to God and life indicative of sainthood. Margery remained isolated on the other side of the Church’s viewpoint as a wife and mother and therefore, while respectable enough, tainted with sexual sin, and thus unable to broach the same kind of relationship with God as her precursor possessed. Kempe does not explicitly state that she could not assume a traditional holy position for women. The male clergy appear to want to contain and silence her—in Chapter 13, Margery recounts an episode in which the clergy were against her and tried to silence her: “Than a yong monke seyde to this creatur, ‘Eyther thow has the Holy Gost or ellys thow hast a devyl within the, for that thu spekyst her to us it is Holy Wrytte, and that hast thu not of thiself’” (Kempe 41). Even though they try to enclose her both physically and verbally, she breaks through their slander to redefine the position of a holy woman though while dealing with the idea that her character must be the subject of “enmys and slawndyr” (54).

Even though Julian was a comfort to assure Margery that she indeed was not as “mad” as many people thought she was, and her “terys turntyn more the devy lle than don the peynes of helle” (54), Kempe could not be in an equal spiritual community with Julian. Margery had to find a better role model upon which to base her religious endeavors and goal of becoming a mystic among her contemporaries. Because she
could not be as Julian, or as some of the popular female saints like St. Margaret or St. Katherine, because she lacked her virginity, she had to find one who shared her story and that she could fashion herself after explicitly.

The mystic with whom Margery could most readily compare herself was St. Bridget of Sweden. Because Bridget was a married woman and the mother of eight children, Margery certainly looks to her and the Bridgettine order in England for guidance and inspiration. Just as she visited Julian of Norwich, she also journeys to Bridget’s sites in Rome for spiritual consolation. Her Book says, “Sche was in the chawmbre that Seynt Brigypt deyd in, and herd a Dewche prset prechyn of hir therin and of hir revelacyonys and of her maner of levyng. And sche knelyd also on the stone on the which owr Lord aperyd to Seynt Brigypt and teld her what day sche sculd deyn on” (Kempe 99). The German priest assuages Margery that she is just as worthy as St. Bridget was to the Church. Such an episode would have been rather empowering to the struggling mystic and demonstrated how Margery begins to attempt to equal her religious foremothers.

Becoming her predecessors’ equal is a goal for which Margery seems to strive, particularly when discussing a foremother with whom she shares biographical commonalities. Margery and her scribe detail an episode where Christ explicitly mentions such an occurrence regarding Bridget in Chapter 20:

For I telle the forsothe ryght as I spak to Seynt Bryde ryte so I spek to the, dowtyr, and I tell the trewly it is trewe every word that is wretyn in Brides boke, and be the it schal be knowyn for very trewth. And thow schal faryn wel, dowtyr, in spyte of all thyn enemys; the mor envye their han to the for my frace, the bettyr shcal I lofe the (58).

Here, Christ assuages her fears by placing her and Bridget on the same level of holiness and access to Him. Even though, Bridget obviously plays an important and accessible role in Margery’s life, she seems to wish to model herself after someone even greater who shares similarities with her own life.

Here, the figure of Mary Magdalene takes hold, and Margery finds someone with a similar tainted past and a “sisterly influence” to find comfort in and to prove to her audience that a woman can be a mystic and holy, even under non-traditional
circumstances. If she can show her society that her tale is akin to that of the revered Magdalene, her audience will find both her Book more credible as well as the “creatur” in which she portrays herself.

The story of Mary Magdalene was a popular one to draw on for the medieval Church and would have been vividly popular as a theatrical performance to show the lay audience how a seemingly monstrous woman could again lead a life of salvation and goodness. Magdalene’s popularity stems from the cult of saints that stood the predominant theme of medieval Catholicism. Margery would have most likely been saturated in the stories of all the saints, and seen their devotional images adorned on even the simplest parishes. Though most of the images have been destroyed, especially post-Reformation and post-Cromwell, medieval historians assure readers that these saintly images were particularly prevalent in the fifteenth century and that most of the images depicted showed saints’ lives and their respective miracles (Stanbury and Ranguin www.holycross.edu). Most of the society would have been accurately aware of the stories of Mary Magdalene, and this would have been only further enhanced by theatrical plays like the Digby play.

Mary Magdalene has a dual representation in the life of Margery. She is both a saint and an actor playing a holy icon. What makes both the figure of Mary the saint and Mary as a theatrical rendition of a saint an educational figure is the heavy focus on the understanding of female sexuality and spirituality and their place in the Church. Margery’s story emphasizes sexuality even when she wishes to minimize it. The tale of Mary Magdalene cannot be told without referring to her as a sexual object. For Mary Magdalene, her illicit sexuality plays an important role in framing her as a religious woman—to borrow Sarah Beckwith’s language, it “signifies God” or rather, her place in a holy order. Mary Magdalene’s body, like Margery’s, becomes the space that, as Beckwith argues, “becomes the site for the close interrelation of symbolic classification, ritual process and the formation of social identity” (Beckwith 25). If Mary’s body represents the site of sexuality, social identity and, allegorically, “fallen” women’s place in relation to the Church, then we can comprehend why her story provides Margery Kempe with a foremother.
This theatrical version of Mary Magdalene borders on the line of the “angel” and “monster” that Gilbert and Gubar describe in their narrative. This third person character embodies both angelic and monstrous qualities, just as Margery’s personification of herself does through the Book. Her character can be read, and was probably performed as, one who transgresses boundaries from naiveté to awareness, as well as from innocence to experience. She experiences the cyclical motion from angel to monster and back again to saint. The opening of the play suggests she embodies all of the “good” qualities of a woman who remains trapped by the limits of her feminine attributes and represents the way in which she is supposed to present herself. Some of these particular ideals that would have been socially valued for her time include total devotion and submission to her father (and to all male power within her life), humility and graciousness for God, and sheer dependence on the men of her life to pull her away from worldly sin and temptation. In short, she embodies the “angel in the house,” trapped forever within the walls of the patriarchy which binds her. It seems that her womanly submission precisely is what makes her a target for the Seven Deadly Sins to come tempt her.

Despite the fact that Mary originally embodies most of the things that a “good woman” should be, she also possesses something that makes her a seemingly “bad woman” by Church standards: wealth. The wealth that her father, Cyprus, leaves to her pollutes this “angel” from the very beginning, and represents something even the most common viewer would have known. The Church hypothesized that women, as a sex, were inherently weak-willed and most susceptible to temptation, especially the worldly kind. Theresa Coletti argues that Mary Magdalene is truly about social standing in relation to women. She notes, “Generations of clerical exegetes pledged to poverty and celibacy readily allied Mary Magdalene’s vice with the corrupting influences of wealth, as well as the fleshliness and fallibility that they deemed central attributes of the female sex. Over the course of the Middle Ages, Mary Magdalene’s associations with sexual vice were imaginatively elaborated in influential scriptural commentary” (Coletti 2). Thus, Mary Magdalene as character stands for the sins of sociality as much as carnality and the fall from grace. Her social ills are responsible
for the awful turn of events and characterization, not unlike the kind that Margery experiences in her own story.

Much like the character and iconographic saint, Margery’s love for money casts her out of the “angel” position a medieval wife and mother should have embodied, and into the fallen or “monster” position she was eventually put in. Because Margery defies her husband’s wishes in the hopes of starting two separate businesses to increase her wealth and status in society, and because her family possessed more money than her husband, she represents that traditional bad woman. She places herself in the same position as the character of Mary and begins to pattern her experience after the life (and theatrical representation) of the saint.

When Margery opens her brewery, she experiences her fall from grace in the masculine world. She recalls the point when she lost in the business world: “the ale was as fayr standing undyr berm as any man mygth se, sodenly the berm wold fallyn down that the ale was lost every brewing afywr other, that hir servawntys weryn aschamyd and would not dwellyn with hir” (Kempe 24). This account demonstrates her failure in the quest for material wealth. Her money and business know-how had previously kept her above her husband’s status, and now, she had to experience the stinging effects of the loss of monetary power.

The wealth and power also come into play when Margery uses her monetary resources in exchange for the terms of chaste marriage. She emphasizes a masculine power while still displaying her feminine submission to John. On of his conditions is “that ye schall pay my dettys er ye go to Jherusalem” (38). To gain her desired chastity, she agrees, and transfers the money to him, thus making herself more feminine and “good” in the religious schema. She and her scribe use the tactic of inversion of wealth in the Book’s Prologue. They write, “Her werdly goodys, which we plentyuows and abundawnt at that day, in lytyl whyle after wer ful bareyn and bare. Than was pompe and pryde cast down and leyd on side” (Kempe 18). This technique shows her progress from wealth to poverty and lay to religious. At the end of her tale, she finds herself in dire poverty, much like the character Magdalene, but it is all for the purpose of looking presentable and holy to the Church’s mold of what a good woman should be. This focus on finances demonstrates an educational point for
her audience (much like the audience of the *Mary Magdalene* play) of how her own lechery and love of prospective wealth almost ruined her for God’s purposes and the holy lifestyle she wishes to pursue, despite the gender challenges that stand in her way.

Her episode parallels the one in the Digby *Mary Magdalene* play in which Mary is led away by the character of Lechery as he tells her, “Ya, lady, for all that, be of good comfort / For swich obusiouns may brede myche disese / Swich despepciouns petit peynes to exaport / Print yow in sportes which best doth yow plese” (ll. 456-459). Lechery will (as the audience already knows) lead her down the beaten path and into the sin which almost ruins her. The parallels between *The Book of Margery Kempe* and a play such as *Mary Magdalene* work on two levels: the theatre serves as a model or foremother for Margery in the same way she intends her narrative to be for her intended (presumably female) audience.

Here, she begins to make her text as if it were a play or a spiritual episode. I would argue that this clearly demonstrates another trope in the way Margery seeks to validate herself. Because she seeks a foremother to grant her autonomy, it seems she fashions her book to be a similar treatise to legends of the saints’ lives or a mystical text like Julian’s *Shewings*. When she concludes the first book of her narrative, her reflections on the writing process hint that she wishes her story to be an example for others: “For sumtyme that sche undirstod bodily it was to ben undirstondyn gostly, and the drede that sche had of hir felynys was the grettest scorge that shche had in erde and and specialy whan sche had hir fyrst felynys, and that drede made hir ful meke for sche had no hoye in the felyn sy schye knew be experiences whetyr it was trewe er not” (Kempe 207). Because Margery comes full circle throughout her journey, she seems to set the tone of her *Book* to subtly suggest that her readership gain wisdom from it.

Perhaps the most important social element of both the Digby play and *The Book of Margery Kempe* in regards to the social aspect is the space in which the female protagonists step out of their expected angel role and into the fissure that divides the binary between angel and monster. Even though the play features Mary predominantly as a “traditional” woman, to serve Christ, to become the mediator
between his body and the social space of the audience, she must fit into a new mold, one of the prophet, preacher and visionary. She assumes this position that destines her for sainthood, one which will invariably change the life and as well as the inspiration for the story of Margery Kempe forever.

Here, it is evident that Margery begins to fashion her *Book* much the sort of didactic theatrical performance found in the Digby *Mary Magdalene*. Just as the play will give the audience didactic instruction on how weak women fall into sin and must ultimately redeem themselves, *The Book of Margery Kempe* will relate her story of the exact same experiences and instances and how her redemption should be a model for others to follow. Margery’s story begins to show striking parallels with Mary’s theatrical representation. It demonstrates how both kinds of texts—the written/oral one of the theatre and the written one of conduct for Kempe—influence not only the audience, but the idea of didactic instruction for an all-encompassing “foremother” for all women. Margery’s scribe declares her purpose in the Preface of her *Book*, describing the text as, “A schort tretys of a creature sett in grett pompe and pride of the wrodl, which sythen was drawyn to awer Lord be gret poverte, sekenes, schamis, and gret reprevys” (21). He thus points out the importance of instruction and learning for her intended audience, “alle the worlde” (19).

Corporeality and women’s fleshliness are not only staples of Margery’s narrative, but of the play and representation of Magdalene as well. Mary’s fall into fleshly lust, though integral to her story and the play, seems to emphasize her good nature and naïveté as the reason for her fall. Her body is the locus for sin, and the sin is something she consents to with her mind. She seems to fall into the Church’s misogynistic stereotype, illustrating the assumption that women’s uncontrollable fleshly lust made their minds so weak that they could not think with a man’s reason. When the Gallant tells her, “Consedere my love into yowr alve / Or elles I am smet with peynes of perplexite,” she replies, “Why, ser, wene ye that I were a kelle?” (ll.518-520). Here, she seems aware of the danger before her. However, she lets her “weak woman’s heart” and fallible woman’s mind (not to mention the wilful work of Lechery) coerce to give up her goodness and fall prey to her feminine desires. Gallant then coyly replies, “Nay, princess, parde, ye be my hertes hele / So wold to God ye
wold be my love fele” (ll.521-2). She accepts this, seemingly because she wants to believe the good reason but more so, because the medieval audience both expects and needs her to fall.

She must “fall” for the message of her story to be accepted by the audience, but it is expected of her, because she is a mere woman, and she cannot stand in the saints’ place of importance if she does not suffer great trials that test her will. Here, Mary represents the polar duality of angel and monster that so conflicts Margery. She is an Eve-figure on the monstrous pole; she has possessed carnal knowledge and knows the world in a way that medieval society thought women should not. Yet, on the other side of the spectrum, she embodies the Virgin Mary as holy, and the epitome of a good, subservient woman. Mary, in effect, represents the ultimate Madonna/Whore figure and this allows her to be seen as real to the eyes of lay society. Margery wants to be like a Madonna figure, but the sin of sexuality has already entered her life. Accordingly, she chooses to emulate Mary Magdalene so that she can have a holy figure that also stands in the “middle” ground between angel and monster, virgin and whore.

Yet, Mary’s sexuality in both the hagiographical account and the theatre aims to instruct—to warn the audience of the frailty of the female mind and to show them, particularly women, what happens if they give in to their bodily desires. The focus on sexuality according to Coletti, is the reason the Church recognizes Mary Magdalene as such an important figure in both the canon of saints and to medieval drama. She writes:

As a product of medieval clerical culture, Mary Magdalene’s designation as a female sexual sinner served different purposes in different historical contexts. It was used to interpret her feminine weakness as an allegory of the fragility of humankind; She also showed one who had reconciled her sexual sin with a recovered virginity, practiced silent confession and preached in public. (Coletti 3)

The turn back to God and recovering sexuality echoes Margery’s struggle with her own sexuality and her married sex life. In the episode where Margery’s husband grants her a celibate marriage, she triumphs in a similar way, gaining back control of
her sexuality. She describes this moment, “Than seyd hir husnond agen to hir, ‘As fre
mot yowr body ben to God as it hath ben to me’” (Kempe 38). Margery’s episode
draws directly from her existential foremother and applies to her own story for the
conduct of others.

Even though Margery’s married sexuality becomes a paramount issue to her
conversion to Christ’s servant, the episode that most closely resembles one in the life
of Mary Magdalene occurs when Margery is tempted by fleshly lust, just like Lechery
and Mary. The Book cites the episode, saying: “Sche went to the man befor seyd that
he schuld have hys lust, as sche wend that he ad seyred, but he made swech
symulacyon tahat sche cowd not know hys entent. Sche was overycomyn, and
consentyd in hir mend, and went to the man to wetyn yf he wold than consentyn to
hire” (29). She places herself in the temptation tradition much like Christ and Mary
Magdalene. Though, unlike Christ, she will fall into her “womanly” trap and give into
the sexuality, which, the medieval Church was sure dominated women’s thoughts and
desires.

As Christ sees “this creaturys presumpcyon” (28), Margery details, in the third
person, what happens to make her story akin to Magdalene’s:

In the second yer of hir tentacyons yit fel so that a man when sche lovyd
wel seyd onto hir on Seynt Margaretyys Evyn befor evynsong that for
anything he would ly be hir and have hys lust of hys body, and sche
should not wythstond hym, for, yf he might not hve his wyl that tyme, he
seyd, he schuld ellys have it another tyme, shce schuld not chese. (28-29)
Margery cannot stop feeling guilty for this indiscretion or rather, fall into sin. She
believes God has forsaken her and she is unable to even enjoy the feast of St. Margaret
because she is so horrified at her own weak will, her mark of being a woman. Just as
Mary Magdalene fell for Lechery’s advances and eventually learned the evils of the
flesh, so does Margery learn the lesson of not falling into sin because of mere
temptation. When the man turns Margery down, she “repentawns of hir synn with
many byttyr teerys of comunccyon” (29).

Margery’s despair echoes Mary’s theatrical woe upon committing her sin. The
Good Angel appears on stage and chastizes her for her error: “Woman, woman, why
art thou so onstabyll? / Ful bitterly this blisse it wol be bowth / Why art thou agens God so veriabyll? / Why thinkes thou nat God unade thee of nowth? / In sin and sorow thou art browth” (ll. 588-592). Like Margery’s tale, Mary must find Christ to save her from herself and from the sin that, despite her seeming womanly naivété, the audience/writers/Church blame on her exclusively. Margery and Mary’s plight seems to parallel even more in Margery’s Book as Christ chooses to compare the two women: “Dowtyr, thou hast despised thiself, therfor thou schalt nevery be despysed of God.Have mend, dowtyr, what Mary Mawdelyn was” (59). Here, Margery’s audience is able to see directly how the two women correlate, particularly in the way Christ graciously excuses their “wanton” ways and assures both of the everlasting love of God.

Another episode in the Digby plays that demonstrates Mary’s reliance and dependence on the masculine, loving figure of Christ is found in this exchange: Jesus says, “Woman, in contrission thou art expert / And in thy sowle hast inward mythe / That sumtime were in desert / And from therkness hast porchasyd lyth / Thy feyth hath savit thee and made thee bryth / Wherfor I sey to thee, ‘vade in pace’” (ll. 686-691). These feeble, weak-willed women have been saved by the manly embodiment of Christ to save them from their own weakened dispositions and from their bodies, which seem to exude sexuality at every turn. Despite the fact that Christ has feminine values, and is described in motherly terms by Julian and Margery, ultimately he is represented as a man if nothing else to reinforce the corporeality of Margery and Mary’s character.

Mary fashions her body at the centrality of her conversion because, as Beckwith has stated, the body is at the epicentre of medieval drama. She argues that the Christ’s body is the central focus of the plays because it is in and of itself a contradiction: “inner/outer, spirit/flesh, male/female, left/right, up/down, noisy/silent, just/unjust, passive/active, public/private and hierarchal/collective” (30). Just as Mary straddles the line between angel/monster, she embodies Christ and makes the contradictions into normalcy. The meaning for her conversion comes out of the fact that becomes an anomaly to the tradition. Her “manly activities” such as preaching and being
outspoken take her away from a traditional role, but create another plane for her to make meaning of her status in Christianity.

Just as Mary reforms amidst two polar dualities, Margery models her life in the same manner to achieve the same result. She realizes she embodies qualities that are seen as both positive and negative. The middle ground between angel and monster stabilizes Margery’s actions and offer explanation for any of her episodes that seem outrageous or heretical. Her experience can be more easily justified because she is not in the role of the typical good woman. Her sexual past and body sets her free in a sense—it allows her to finally gain a completely celibate marriage with her husband. Despite the fact that Margery would have been seen as abnormal or bad for stepping out of her marital constraints, she and Mary embody revolutionaries by taking vows of chastity after lives of sexual experience. Just as Magdalene stepped out societal bounds, Margery will also, so that she suffers what Gibson calls a “martyrdom by slander so that it may be more pleasing to God that she suffer socially” (47). The body, social place, and socially acceptable behavior that Margery challenges appear in the Digby play as Magdalene’s struggle after her fall.

Mary Magdalene’s body becomes more prevalent as the focus of centrality upon Christ’s death. She stands as the medium between the audience and Christ. Like the Virgin Mary, she has privy access to Jesus in ways that other people do not. She stands in the “middle” of the good and bad feminine dichotomy because of her body. Just as Christ is a set of contradictions (especially in terms of sex/gender), Mary represents the ultimate oxymoron: the repentant whore. As Beckwith points out, “We understand the body of Christ through the relation developed with it by Mary Magdalene, the pilgrims, and other disciples” (31). By becoming Christ’s medium, and mouthpiece, she forever changes her status both sexually and socially.

Even though she is among Christ’s privileged visionaries and contemporaries, Mary’s character still appears to try to embody that innocent and naïve good woman, despite her awareness of the pitfalls of sin. Even though she is taking on a greater role of prominence among the apostles, like Kempe, she strives to appear as a docile and humble servant to reiterate her femininity and value. She has tasted the “forbidden fruit,” so to speak, but to be acceptable as a woman, particularly a holy one, she must
act as good woman did in her prelapsarian state. If she acted as though she had already fallen and submitted to the flesh, she would have been seen socially as having sexual prowess and the traditionally male attribute of knowledge. In this state, she would have lost her traditionally feminine role and also would have stepped into the grey area of the monstrous that women were taught to fear.

To enforce this point of Mary playing the role of a humble female, so she can further represent herself as a good woman, the Digby play makes Magdalene’s feminine attributes quite exaggerated on the stage. In the theatrical production, Mary stands in prominence, as the character who gives the most attention and concern with the responsibilities in the scene following Jesus’ death. Because the play focuses predominantly on her reaction in the resurrection scene, it frames Mary Magdalene as the “angel woman” that was revered in the Church. In the scene, Mary Magdalene says “O Peter and Jhon, we be begilyed / Owr Lordes body is borne away! / I am aferd itt is diffilyd / I am so carefull, I wott natt whatt to saye” (ll. 1031-1034). Here, Mary represents the traditional woman that the audience would have been familiar with from the scriptures. The scene draws attention to her pure love for Christ and thus detracts attention away from her “fallen” state. She appears to be humble, naïve, and selfless. This persona takes the emphasis off the corporeal sin that taints her, and focuses on her good, “womanly” attributes. Yet, by submitting to the idea of playing the good woman for the audience, she cheats herself out of the autonomy she could gain by proving her own worth despite her lucid past.

Margery’s fear of flesh has the obvious implications of fear of lechery and sexuality that Mary’s does; but for Margery, her sexuality bridges her with Christ as his “blessed spouse.” Though Mary gets her connection with Christ’s body by following the physical man around before and after death, Margery manifests this physicality by discussing her sexual status with the spirit of Christ. She laments, “For becawse I am no mayden, lack of maydenhed is to me now gret sorwe” (60) to further explicate her shame. However, Christ assures her “Thu art to me a synguler lofe, dowtyr, and therfor I behote thou schalt have a synguler grace in hevyn” (60). Several chapters later, to cement both the chastity of her marriage and the love she has for Christ, she invites him into her marriage bed as she would a spouse.
Yet, instead of Christ assuming a powerful, masculine role he practices one of subservience to Margery to prove just how important she remains to him:

> For it is convenient the wyf to be homly with hir hosbond. Therefore most I nedys be homly with the and lyn in thi bed with the. Dowtyr, thow desyrest gretst to se me, and thu mayst boldly, what thu art in thi bed, take me to the as for this weddyd husbond, as thy derworth derlyng, and as for thy swete sone for I wyl be lovyd as a sone schuld by lovyd with the modyr and wil that thu love me, dowtyr, as a good wife owyth to love hir husbonde. And therfor thu mayest bodlye take min the armys of thi sowle and kyssen my mowth, myn hed, nad my fete as swetely as thow wylt (95).

Here, Christ truly assumes the role of a spouse to Margery by emphasizing not only his spiritual duties but the physical ones as well. His divine promise to be her spiritual husband is demonstrated with utmost attention drawn to the corporeal aspect that Margery has always used to define her religious position. This fleshly view also corresponds with Magdalene’s most famous qualities of combining the spiritual with the flesh.

Margery and Mary both operate out of the middle position between femininity and masculinity, angel and monster, with clear, corporeal access to a masculine embodiment of Christ. Whether it is Margery’s physical touching of him in the aforementioned passage or Magdalene’s privilege of talking and being in the physical presence of Christ, they both are privy to Him in the human sense. Here, they both turn what caused them to fall into sin and work, socially, from within it.

Mary’s character is privy to a direct relationship with Christ, just as Margery had as well. Yet, Christ restricts Mary from being able to physically feel him after his body is resurrected. The theatrical version represents Christ as keeping Mary at a formidable distance; he says to her, “Towche me natt, Mary. I ded natt asend / To my Father in deyite, and onto yowrs” (ll. 1074-5). In this instance, Margery manages to usurp her foremother by being granted direct access to touching Christ’s body when he visits her. She clearly chooses to emphasize corporeality in her relationship with Him.
and it serves to allow her to break free of being something lesser than Mary Magdalene.

The theatrical version of Magdalene’s life serves to mirror Margery’s and to demonstrate social problems that would have been prevalent for both women. The two have similar correlative episodes, and presumably this would have been Margery’s attempt at molding her life after the saint’s. Yet, she seems to wish to break out of the stereotype “angel in the house” role that Mary Magdalene often seems to embody. Margery desires more autonomy than her theatrical saintly predecessor. Besides critiquing women’s sexuality and “uncontrollable urges,” *Mary Magdalene*, as Coletti argues, is a social commentary. From Mary’s seducer being a highly positioned “Gallant” to her odd relationship with Curiosity, Coletti notes that this play embodies, “a cultural signifier for social and economic anxieties. Mary Magdalene’s encounter with sin is refracted through the discourse and spectacle of status and class differences” (11). Through the course of the play, Mary’s sin seems even greater because of the expectations put on her because she is of a higher class. Her subservience to her father/brother, her willingness to go with Gallant (who, Coletti notes, would have been of a high social standing) both for “love” and to submit to the will of a high-ranking man, all point to the play’s heavy didactic message on women knowing their social space in addition to their sexual ones.

Scene 32 of the Digby play opens with the angel telling Mary what she must do to please God: “Abasse thee noutt, Mary, in this place! / Owr Lordes precept thou must fulfill / To pase the see in schortt space / Onto the lond of Marcyll / King and queen converte shall ye / And byn amittyd as an holy apostylesse” (ll. 1376-1381). God has placed Mary in the “fissure” between gender and apostolic duties—still a sexually repentant woman, but, now she must do the duty of men by preaching the word of God and advocating for Jesus outside of the “female space” of the home.

Mary pleads with the king and queen upon her arrival to Marseille, but finds her words having no effect upon the heathen couple, especially when the King threatens “Herke, woman, thow hast many resonnes grett / I thingk, onto my goddess aperetyning they beth! / But thou make me answer soon, I shall thee fret / And cut the tong owt of thy hed!” (ll.1527-1530). She fails in doing a male job until promising that
the queen will conceive, thus implementing “femaleness” into her preaching equation to make it socially acceptable.

An even greater sense of “femaleness” enters Mary’s picture when she must do the “inside duties of the house” by delivering the converted queen’s child in a socially acceptable context. The King instructs, “Wiff, syn that ye woll take this wey of prise / Therefor can I no more seyn / Now, Jhesu be owr guide, that is hye justice / And this blisseyd womman, Mary Maugleyn!” (ll. 1709-1712). By this point, Mary finds a socially acceptable place outside the home that places her in the same position as the Virgin Mary. She stands like a goddess of matronly wisdom and motherly attributes.

Margery specifically and most heavily draws on this performative aspect of Mary’s character to emulate and emphasize in her own text. To assuage the series of harsh criticisms that Kempe receives in the course of her Book, she realizes she needs to find a role that is socially acceptable for medieval women to redeem all of the negativity swirling around her persona. The childbirth episode represented in the Digby play parallels chapter 75 in Margery’s story where she emulates Mary’s episode with the laboring queen; here, Margery herself steps into the pious midwife role to help a woman who has gone mad following the birth of her child. She recounts, “And whan sche cam into the hows, as sone as the seke woman that was alienyd of hir witte saw hir, sche spak to hir sadly and goodly and seyd sche was ryth wocome to hir. And sche was ryth glad of hir comyng and gretly confortyd be hir presens” (171). By using her role as a mother, she shows that she still is feminine, and still has good Madonna-like abilities that emphasize her role as angel. She embodies the idyllic views of three saints—the holy Virgin, St. Margaret (her namesake and the patron saint of childbirth), and of course, Mary Magdalene. Margery uses the trope of childbirth and her female duties to justify her visions and similarities to the sainted women as well.

The way in which Margery practices her affective piety ranges from doing holy things for Christ to placing herself alongside holy figures to be as they were. The writing of her Book is another manifestation of being within the Christian tradition. Nicholas Love explains this type of piety as the holiest submission to God. He writes, “As Seynt Gregory & other doctors seyn, that holi writte may be expownet & vunderstande in diuerse maneres, & to diuerse purposes, so that it be not ageyns the
byleue or gude maneres” (Love 10). The composition of her story represents something she does, for Christ, as a holy duty. It is how she submits to Christ, just as Mary Magdalene does when helps and comforts others. For Kempe, her book represents that same type of help and guidance.

Yet, it is performative aspect that demonstrates how she becomes as Christ, and other holy figures. Margery’s most obvious and striking embodiment of stepping into the idyllic female role occurs when she has the vision of being the handmaiden to the Virgin Mary and St. Anne so that she may witness the Virgin’s birth, as well as Christ’s. Margery thus implants herself in the maternal position of the Holy Family, and while this vision seems outrageous (perhaps even blasphemous), the medieval audience would have been familiar with this trope of mysticism. It could have been seen as a gift, or a true, loving devotion to God. Unfortunately, for Margery, her often disapproving public did not put her in the same category as Julian of Norwich. For Kempe, even though she steps “outside of the womanly home,” she transplants herself into a socially acceptable realm of femininity and servitude that her society found more acceptable.

The importance of foremothers and feminine lineage is a paramount issue that Gilbert and Gubar demonstrate throughout their argument. They explain, “[The woman] searches for a female model not because she wants dutifully to comply with male definition of her femininity but because she must legitimize her own rebellious endeavors” (50). To them, women need a foremother; they need a grounding to base their cases on. Margery places herself in the same position as these female saints and thus emulates her religious foremother(s). By serving the female lineage of Christ, she emulates the good duties of St. Anne, the Virgin Mary, Christ, St. Margaret and Mary Magdalene and makes herself a social exemplar instead an outcast.

The episode in which Margery imagines herself as Christ’s handmaiden also serves another purpose besides using motherhood as a link to bind her to the Holy Family—it establishes another kind of foremother. The episode enables her to literally and figuratively perform an act, just as an actor performed Mary Magdalene’s role. Here, Margery takes the stage and becomes holy by acting the part. In acting the part of a holy woman and mystic, she reiterates the link to her foremothers and creates a
position where she gains the ability to be better than they were. Gibson draws attention to this “devotional theatre” Margery implements to act the part: “Margery has, in a sense, out-humbled, and out-performed the Virgin Mary herself by not being just a handmaiden but handmaid to the handmaiden, as in being chosen by Mary to carry the baggage when she and Joseph go on their family visit to St. Elizabeth” (50). By imitating – and then surpassing- her foremothers’ abilities, she places herself literally in their lineage and validates her own endeavors by acting her part. Her acting as something greater than her predecessors also allows her to serve as a foremother for her female audience and makes her Book more heavily didactic in purpose. She gains her validity from being greater than her predecessors and fully subsuming their position in both the religious and authorial sense.

An important part to Margery’s acting is her ability to turn her performance into a particularly social and physical spectacle. When Margery and other pilgrims head to the Holy Land, she details how her company ostracized her saying, “Also this company which had putt the forseyd creatur fro her tabyl that sche schulde no lengar etyn among hem ordeynd a schip for himself to seylyn in” (74). As the other travelers stand aghast at her continuous weeping, Margery demonstrates her love for Christ in a way they cannot. By truly acting the part of devout, she stands above them and somehow closer to Christ by performing her own social martyrdom.

In all of her acting ability, Margery manages to fully equal and surpass Mary Magdalene and Bridget of Sweden. She has taken the two holy women that share biographical commonalities with her, and manipulated her character and tone of her story so that she appears to be better than they were. In the episode in Chapter 20 where Christ explicitly mentions Bridget, he tells Kempe: “thow schuldyst have mech more mervayle in my pacyens and mech mor sorwe in the synne of the pepyl” (58). By stating this, it appears that Christ has privileged Margery over Bridget and made her quest and visions more important than hers. Regarding Magdalene, Christ privileges Margery’s visions and new-found marital chastity by allowing her to be physical only with Him. He allows Kempe to serve His family and grants her access that he had denied to Magdalene. Even though, Margery feels that she has out-acted her
foremothers, she still realizes the importance of aligning her story and persona with them so that she can maintain the position of superiority with her audience.

One of the most important ways that Margery keeps a link to her foremothers, particularly Magdalene, is emphasis on their own physicality. Bodily emphasis further demonstrates how Margery takes great care to suffer as much and more than Magdalene did. Kempe draws attention to how they both operate from a “fissured” space—one that is devoid of either explicit femininity or masculinity and that exists between the borders of the rational/irrational and sanity/insanity – they must personalize and make it womanly and acceptable. Accordingly, Margery must suffer just as Mary did; this was the plight for women in the religious hierarchy in the fifteenth century. Each must act the part of a holy woman, by performing this seeming martyrdom, and suffering socially as well as physically, their actions will be justified and their experiences will be validated. Their physical and social suffering is a real component of their spiritualism, but, just like an actor portrays Magdalene’s suffering, Margery allows her character to act out the suffering to draw more attention to it, so she can outdo the legendary saint.

In lieu of “social suffering,” as Gilbert and Gubar point out, women often physically suffer as a result of their anxiety to step outside the socially acceptable role. Both characters suffer physical discomforts throughout the performance of their text. For Mary, it includes starving in the wilderness and being unable to eat until God nourishes her with a manna-like sustenance. Margery does penance by foregoing the eating of meat to fasting for days on end. She wears hair shirts and weeps constantly so that she may absorb some of Christ’s pain, especially when she witnesses the Passion sequence in Jerusalem. Their desire for physical suffering seems to be motivated as much by a need to absorb Christ into themselves as it is motivation by a desire to pay for their most grievous errors.

The physical discomforts only serve to re-emphasize the actor’s and Margery’s character she fashions in the production of her text. This “fissure” of space and ambiguous social/gender roles that Mary and Margery operate from makes it seem that their polluted bodies are absolutely critical to their holiness. As Beckwith has pointed out regarding devotional theatre, “The body is not what one has, but what one is. It
must perform a bond of love in the community of the faithful” (59). Mary must offer her body to God, to the audience. She must practice asceticism to correct that mutilation it has suffered at the hands of sexual impurity. She uses her body to act the role a foremother to her female audience and conduct them in how to be a good woman all while validating her own claim.

Even though Margery bases so much of her text on devotional theatre and the cult of sainthood that permeated her culture, the search for a literary and spiritual foremother fails her. Julian of Norwich is not able to simply give Margery the societal acceptance she craves; she merely provides support and represents a type of ideal she can never submit to, something she is too tainted to become. Bridget of Sweden provides a mystic with whom Margery can identify but easily surpass by having access to Christ. Mary Magdalene, as a theatrical and iconographic character provides a model but again lacks the authority and credence to allow Margery to feel validated in her journey. Magdalene represents a historical figure, and a story/character that, like Julian, serves as inspiration but lacks authority to authorize Kempe.

Though Margery bases her tale on the story of Mary Magdalene and tries to emulate her bodily focus, her spiritual motions, and her behavior in every holy aspect, she then realizes what Christ has told her the whole time: he loves her the way she is. She “saves” her son in the second book and works as an agent of conversion; her social ills are thus qualified as she truly becomes mystic and preacher. She has sought her foremothers, and they have managed to show her that her path will be difficult and give her some solace in her journey. Yet, neither can be her necessary mode of providing validation. The theatre has given her a model and she enhances her book by basing it on a paradigm her reading audience would have been familiar with and thus strengthening her own validity as woman of God.

Margery uses her Book as a platform for surpassing her female predecessors and breaking free of the traditional mystic role. Though Mary-the-character is assumed into Heaven and eventually becomes a saint, she does not “produce” written work with her own words and does not seek to become an authoritative author. In short, Mary slips into the angelic social and bodily mores that put her back inside the “house,” Heaven. Magdalene does not possess the power to tell her own story, all she has is a
fabricated account of her life, retold and mutilated on a stage and taken for the truth. Because of these factors, Kempe must take religious drama and the story of St. Mary Magdalene at face value. The theatre surely motivates and helps her along her journey, but in short, Kempe’s body and sexuality and her ability to authorize her own Book, are all she has to demarcate her from her predecessors so that she may carve her own religious niche and form a pathway to organized religion.

Margery’s reliance on devotional theatre and religious women’s examples demonstrate the piety and respect she has for the medieval Church – she wants to follow in some kind of example of women they have esteemed as great and holy exemplars for society. Yet, she must realize that even though she has a “past” like the figure of Mary Magdalene, if she submits in the exact same ways the actor demonstrates on stage, she will just fade back into the cycle of women being looked over in religious visions and orders. She will be stuck forever in the “house” of Heaven, and have no control over what male scribes say about her the story of her life. She will forever be at their mercy and at the whim of their interpretations.

Because she chooses to take action and write the story herself (rather, she dictates to her scribe), she gains control of the “phallic” pen (Gilbert and Gubar 3). Margery stands with a type of renewed confidence from searching out her foremothers yet at the same time, she realizes that they are not the validating force for her work and her ability to find a religious place. Because Julian of Norwich and Mary Magdalene can not give her authorization, she realizes what will in the end. Through the medium of her “fleshly” body that stands in the central position of her book, her “stage”, she reclaims control of her sexuality and femininity so that she can make her voice heard and find a place within the hierarchy of the Church.
CHAPTER THREE

Identity, Authority and Audience: Margery Kempe’s Anxiety of Authorship and Desire for Autonomy

This creatur was inspired wyth the Holy Gost and bodyn hyr that sche schuld don hem wryten and man a booke of hyr felyngs and hir revelacyons. Sum proferyd hir to wrytyn hyr felyngs wyth her owen handys. Than had the creatur no wryter that wold fulfylle hir desyr ne geve credens to hir felinygs (Kempe 19)

Margery Kempe opens her Book with, arguably, the most controversial and prominent theme that seeps through every chapter of her narrative: her fear of continued alienation from the medieval Church and her desperate need to be validated as a mystic and a writer. She wrote “a spiritual biography which is often called the first autobiography in the English language. It represented her claim to spiritual status and evidence of her special relationship with Christ” (Stanbury and Ranguin http://www.holycross.edu/ragintro.html). She must cope with public scrutiny, rampant misogyny, overcoming the limitations of her physicality, and her biggest problem of all—writing her story. She must cope with physically getting her tale written, having her work validated by both Christ and the medieval clergy, and finding a scribe who will serve as a filter for her words. I will argue that through the course of her “anxiety of authorship,” Kempe employs several tactics to circumvent her fears that accompany the aforementioned challenges. Through her emphasis on her corporeal nature and redefinition of femininity she is able to conquer these fears and make a narrative that transforms the mystical tradition, and creates place for which she has been searching within the Catholic Church.

To truly grasp the poles of Margery’s hesitancy as an author, it is necessary to discuss what exactly she appears to be seeking from her Book. Margery seems concerned mostly about her narrative being accepted as a valid form of mystical
literature. As she learned from her visit to Julian of Norwich and her emulation of female saints like Mary Magdalene, she rests far outside the spectrum of virgin anchorress or saint; neither of her spiritual (or “literary” to borrow Gilbert and Gubar’s term) foremothers came under such public scrutiny as to the particular truthfulness of their religious experiences. Margery constantly stands in the scrutiny of the public eye, particularly that of male clerics. She seems to desire more than anything to be believed, and to have her text accepted by the religious community, as well as her audience, so that her fears can be alleviated and she can consider herself a true visionary.

Also paramount to her deepening insecurities are her issues with authority, authorship, and power. As Chapters one and two detailed, Margery’s main source of anxiety lies in her spiritual authority and where she stands as Christ’s servant. She remains unsure about her place, if any, within the Christian tradition and Church. However, she faces the additional challenge of finding her textual authority as an author and literary progenitor. She spends much time detailing the events of her strivings not only for validity but also to be the sole author of her book. This creative power as a writer would grant her the sense of authority she craves and put her in a valid spiritual role. It would keep her within the bounds of the accepted roles of female mystic, and she would be seen by the harsh clerical eyes as a good medieval woman. She does not wish to be further limited by her flesh, by society or by males who feel that her mystical experience is not real. She strives for true authority—to be both an exemplary mystical figure and to finally to have the space within the Church for which she longs.

The primary issue that fuels Margery’s authorship concerns lies the opaque definition of author in the Middle Ages. More often than not, at the hands of the patriarchal society, women’s literary work was attributed to a male author (Summit 91). As Jennifer Summit points out, authority was often linked to auctors, ancient theologians or classical writers who in a way oversaw a work and “commanded deference and obedience. The auctor’s status emerged through a system that linked auctoritas, authority, to tradition, defined as a stream of continuous influence by its root tradere, to pass on” (92). Margery must work through the dual issues of her scribe
and making sure her narrative reflects her voice. She carefully selects the copyist to make sure that his writing is authentic regarding experiences. She finds a scribe who “behyte hir that if he cowd redyn it he wolde copyn it owt and wrytyn it betyr with good wylle” (Kempe 19). It appears that he wants to keep it authentic but will write it “betyr.” Margery must accept this fate. Summit notes that women were denied the powerful role of auctor (93); thus, men’s power reigns as paramount as it convolutes the “true voice” of woman mystic.

The collaboration of medieval texts and “authority” through the aid of a scribe is one in which a modern audience has trouble comprehending. The modern conception of author is creator; certainly the context of Gilbert and Gubar’s authorship anxiety is one of grabbing the (phallic) pen and creating one’s own tradition. For Margery, as Summit points out, her technique of submission to the male scribe was particularly effective. She argues: “The scribe establishes Kempe’s authority by showing precisely that she is not an original creator, but rather one who upholds pre-existing models of traditio and auctoritas. The presence of the scribe, then does not negate the authorship of the medieval woman visionary but rather produces it. The biographer or scribe becomes the source of the saintly woman’s authority, rather the other way around” (Summit 98). A female visionary and her scribe cooperate to create a compilation piece in their recording of her life. While the female visionary seeks to create meeting with her words, the scribe is able to help her meditate on her words and in effect, guides her as to the best compilation possible (98-99). Despite Summit’s outlook that a scribe validates a mystic’s writing, this does not directly correlate with Kempe. Margery seems more concerned on having her own autonomy and having the narrative be hers alone. She describes her goal in Chapter 1: “she knew hir frendys and hir meny and all other that cam to hir to se how owyr Lord Jhesu Cryst had wrowt hys grace in hir” (Kempe 23). The scribe cannot provide validation; that ability is solely attributed to Christ.

Anxiety is obviously a prevalent theme in Margery’s narration. Yet, the numerous instances of her uneasiness rest on a polar duality. She both fears the criticism from the public, particularly her male confessors and clerics, and she embraces it so that she may suffer more for her spiritual purpose. She despairs
stepping outside of the feminine role, but if she desires to be a mystic and find a holy place within the Church, she must go outside the home and leaving the womanly realm. It seems that one particularly prevalent fear is that her Book will somehow be invalidated due to of her level of distance from the audience because her text is filtered through the hand of her scribe. She cares deeply about audience reception and, even though scribes were traditional methods of writing in the fifteenth century, this filter seems to have the possibility to corrupt the message she strives to get across. She faces the challenge of finding a scribe who will believe her visions and write them down accurately with truth to her detail. Even though she knows that her biography is not her writing per se, she must strive to manipulate the audience and the scribe that her work is valid and authentically her own.

The occurrences of male scribes’ dictating the direction of female textuality was a common occurrence in medieval women’s writing. Carolyn Dinshaw shows how one of the most troubling issues with female authorship is the glosser/scribe who changes her work to fit his own model. She argues, “Woman is associated with the body and the text. She is opposed to the gloss, written by men, learned, anti-pleasure, and anti-body” (Dinshaw 114). Women’s independence threatens men’s authority over the writing and editing process of the text, thus devaluing their position. Margery, much like Dinshaw’s example of the Wife of Bath from Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales, represents “independent feminine will and desire” (114) and emphasizes her own sexuality in relation to the text. By making textuality into a type of corporeality, she effectively transcends the limits of good and bad woman into the masculine realm of authority.

Dinshaw also argues that the Wife of Bath was Chaucer’s most important character for the ways in which she dealt with the male pilgrims in her quest. She notes, “She [the Wife of Bath] makes audible precisely what patriarchal discourse would keep silent, reveals the exclusion and devalorization that patriarchal discourse performs. Speaking as the excluded Other, she explicitly and affirmatively assumes the place the patriarchal discourse accord the feminine” (115). Margery represents the same kind of position as the outspoken, feminine pilgrim in her travels. She does not do as the traditional good woman and keep silent, but rather ascribes her bodily
emphasis into the text to usurp the scribal authority as her own. Though she can not physically wrest the pen, she can manipulate her scribe by using her corporeality and drawing particular attention to it throughout the course of her narrative.

Despite Margery’s efforts to gain control of the writing process, she still falls into the fear Gilbert and Gubar have described a phenomena they call the “anxiety of authorship.” Despite the fact that they apply their model to the nineteenth century woman writer, it can certainly apply to Margery’s case. She fits into their definition of being literally and figuratively alienated from her own work due to the influence of patriarchal restraints and inability to gain the autonomy to actually write. They describe this “anxiety” as emergent because the Western literary tradition recognizes itself as predominantly male-centered thus women are left struggling with the problem of exactly how to get their voices across a patriarchally-bound structure. They state, “A literary text is not only speech quite literally embodied, but also power mysteriously made manifest, made flesh. In patriarchal Western culture, therefore, the text’s author is a father, a progenitor, a procreator, an aesthetic patriarch whose pen is an instrument of generative power like his penis” (Gilbert and Gubar 6). Their thesis would have also applied to Kempe’s situation because much of her struggle lies not only in the writing of her text, but also, finding her place in the religious tradition. Her niche within the Church and struggle for autonomy in her text can be seen as interchangeable and all of these contribute to the poles of anxiety she experiences.

This model is particularly prevalent for Margery in the fifteenth century. Modern scholarship has gathered that Margery was probably functionally illiterate in Latin and perhaps penmanship, so this rendered her unable to have the authority to write. Wendy Harding elaborates on the implications of Margery’s illiteracy. She says, “Margery’s illiteracy raises questions as to her authorship. Discerning the text the indelible imprint of a masculine, clerical hand the scribe selected the episodes of the narrative to impose order and to give Margery’s spiritual a direction” (Harding 169). Because Kempe and the scribe chose to write her Book in the vernacular, she probably reached a wider audience especially women. Thus, Kempe transcends the boundaries of literacy and illiteracy to make a didactic treatise she can gain control of, despite her authorial disadvantages. Men has gained most of the literary and compositional
control of Kempe’s society as they were classically educated and women, most often, were not. Kempe challenges this mode and attempts to gain the control she is denied by using the anti-feminine model like the Wife of Bath. By using her corporeality, she challenges the patriarchal control of the pen.

Gilbert and Gubar further explore issues of male control over women’s writing and male dominance in the area of literarcy. They argue that women did not have access to the power the “phallic pen” embodied. Gilbert and Gubar also tie literary power into a religious metaphor that would have been particularly true for Kempe’s society—the importance of gender roles: “The roots of ‘authority’ tell us, after all, that if woman is man’s property then he must have authored her, just as surely as they tell that if her authored her she must be his property” (13). Man is the literary creator just as God was for the world; God authors man and man “authors” woman. This male surge of power to be the sole progenitor in writing further explicates how men push women into the polar opposites of feminine angel and anti-feminine monster in a creative or literary outlet. For Margery’s book, of course, it is not only male authors who strive to invalidate her work and purpose—it is the harsh glare of her predominantly male, disapproving public that divides her femininity and sexuality into the aforementioned poles.

_The Book of Margery Kempe_ demonstrates the dual power roles and striving to make a cohesive work with two autonomous voices. The scribe begins his _auctor_ role in her preface and begins her tale in his own words “Sche browt it to the presete wyth ryght glad cher, preyng hym to do hys good wyl, and and sche schuld prey to God for hym and purchasyn hym grace to redden it and wrytyn it also” (20). Kempe employs her active voice even through the scribe’s hand. This literal writing (or “righting”) of Margery’s experience by a man, in terms of the modern definition of authorship, would have made her the weak vessel of the process, a mere contributor, rather than the important author. But for the fifteenth century, her contributions make the work her own and provide a type of validation for her story. Even though it appears that she becomes edited out of her work via the scribe’s influence, it actually helps her assert her feminine influence for the time period in which she lived.
Medieval scribes were not merely copyists for an author’s work; they played an integral role in shaping the text by playing both the editor and revisionist as well. Lynn Staley has elaborated on exactly what scribes did in their duties: “Writers, however, did not simply employ scribes as copyists; they elaborated upon the figurative language associated with the book as a symbol and put scribes to another use by incorporating them into their texts as tropes” (Staley 12). Despite Margery’s literary disadvantages, she’s quite aware of the role the scribes will play in her life story. Yet, she manipulates the text by continuing “playing up” her female subservience, submitting to her male scribe/author as well as her male God, and finding ways so that she can showcase her own unique view of the events in her life.

As previously stated, Margery faces the dual challenge of asserting herself as a woman in the face of a discerning patriarchy as well as being illiterate in Latin and unable physically to write. She takes what seems to the modern audience to be a disadvantage and uses her feminine persona to triumph over it. By employing a submission technique to male power, she wrests control of the tone of her narrative. She effectively fashions a third person “creature” who she presents in different aspects throughout the text to exaggerate the submission and authority position she plays. Staley explicates this point of her manipulative power, “Her [Kempe’s] presentation of Margery as illiterate may reflect contemporary distrust for those who possessed or could read religious books. Kempe’s emphasis upon illiteracy may also indicate her sure understanding of the conventions of spiritual writings for or about women” (33). By emphasizing her illiteracy and seeming ignorance, she assuages the fears that the male society had about women’s mysticism and visions. She manipulates the reader further by “being” Margery when it is pertinent (i.e. validating her religious experiences) but being able to point to the scribe as the “writer” in the face of religious accusations.

With as many diversionary techniques as Margery uses, her technique calls the reality of her fashioning as a character into question as well. Margery’s authorship fears, as well as her uneasiness with finding a place in the religious tradition, do not suggest that she would do something as bold as inventing a scribe when she could easily credit herself. Her multiple literary devices besides being a third-person
character, such as the aforementioned switching of roles between angel and monster, humility and authority seem to suggest multiple problematic layers that Kempe must break through. It appears that she uses the scribe to bolster her own authorship ability by showing her audience that she had the approval from a man of God and that she was like the other women mystics of her day and that a scribe approved of her revelations. Staley, however, argues that she may or may not have even really been illiterate or had a scribe. It could have simply been another rhetorical tool for her to employ (33-4). She maintains a good and certainly controversial point, but given Kempe’s fifteenth century time frame, and the simple fact that the other spiritual women that Margery models herself upon employed male scribes, I find it highly improbable that this was the case.

Margery’s reliance on her scribe and priest demonstrate her virtues as a traditionally good woman, reliant on her male authority. But, it also makes her authoritative and again the center of power for her readers. She gains her autonomy by allowing him to say she is valid by publishing and penning her story. Dinshaw draws attention to how this subservience was empowering to her: “Margery shows herself deeply committed to this unnamed and ailing priest/reader. Theirs was an important spiritual bond.” (Dinshaw 226). Margery very may well have perished under religious pressure had this scribe not trusted in her, believed and provided a source of validation so that her audience could follow in his footsteps.

As chapter one demonstrated, Margery is familiar with and comfortable using manipulation on her audience when it comes to areas of her spiritual narrative that can be questioned. She appears to be so uneasy straddling the line of angel and monster or spiritual and heretical that she wishes to cast herself in the best possible light for society and reading community as well. For Kempe’s overall religious purpose of being a true mystic, authority equals autonomy and validity. By being the author of her text, she will gain public respect and effectively carve her niche not only in the mystic tradition, but in the medieval religious system as well.

Margery’s first explanation to her audience about how her book retains its truthfulness (and more importantly, how she retains her autonomy) lies in her
description of how her task of finding a scribe came to be and more importantly, the integral role that this copyist has in relation to her text:

This creatur was inspired wyth the Holy Gost and bodyn hyr that sche schuld don hem wryten and mayn a book of hyr felyngs and hir revelaeyons. Sum proferd hir to wrytyn hyr felyngys wyth her owen handys, and sche wold not consetyn in no wey, for sche was comawndyd in hir sowle that sche schuld not wrytyn so soone. (Kempe 19)

A scene like this demonstrates how Margery manipulates the power the patriarchy denies her. She seems to grasp the pen and shows how she chose a scribe, and how her will dictated who she filters her experience through. She tells how God gave her the orders of when she should write her revelations down, and the arduous process she goes through of finding a scribe. Finding a scribe for Kempe was more than editorial task, though. Because her scribe retains more authority than a mere copier, Margery must actually consult him during the editorial process of her narrative.

Kempe illustrates this point in her Book when she explains how the first copy of her text made her seek a scribe to fix the story. She writes, “The booke was so evel wretyn that he cowd lytly skyll theron, for it was neithyr good Englysch ne Dewch. Therfor the prest leved fully ther schuld nevyr man redyn it, but it wer special grace. Nevyrthelesse, he behyte hir that if he cowd redyn it he wolde copyn it owt and wrytyn it betyr wyth good wylle” (19). Here, the scribe represents the editor, the auctor, and the copier, yet Kempe retains her own autonomy. She characterizes his as inept and it reinforces the fact that she holds the cards as to when and in what fashion her story will be told.

However, he is still the filter that her story must pass through, so even though the story is supposedly Kempe’s own words, he has a uniquely validating and powerful position. Still, even though Margery has found a “wrytyr” for her stories, she slants the wording so that she puts herself in the position of authority. She is the one who must be commanded by God to write; it is she who “schyld don wryten hyr felyngs and revelacions and the forme of her levyngs” (19). She does not mention the scribal aspect until her valid “author” (that is, Christ) has assured her it is acceptable.
She practices female docility (presumably, that would have impressed both scribe and audience) and thus grips the reigns of the control of her Book.

She again demonstrates her feminine virtue as well as her independence from the traditional female status in a particular episode with her priest. Throughout the episodes with important male religious figures that will shape her text, Margery acts very carefully in regards to how she interacts with them. She realizes that they hold the key to her goal of becoming a valid mystic and writer, yet she does not want to grant them full autonomy. She manipulates her persona to seem both subservient and independent. This manipulation of the binary roles is clear as she interacts with those who help her. The priest reads to her and seems to grant her a literary insight that she had previously lacked. As she says, “He red hir so many bokys and supportyd hir in hir wepyng and hir crying. Aftyrwardysys he wex beneffysyd and had gret cur of sowle, and than lykyd hym ful wel that he had redde so mech beforn” (141). By being able to understand the priest and the complex religious ideas and language, she appears to exalt herself above a lowly female status. She places herself in the literary tradition, and more importantly, in the religious position by being able to offer her own insight regarding piety. She again reemphasizes her acceptance by a male authority figure when the priest “lovyd hir and trustyd hir ful meche and blessed the tyme that evyr he knew hir” (141). Just as her scribe must be able to validate her experience, Margery chooses to highlight how yet another clerical man has claimed her to be of high spiritual status and worthy of the visions that the public has condemned.

The tension between the masculine and feminine, physical and spiritual and writer and creator actually demonstrate the poles of Kempe’s anxiety regarding male influence. Kempe constantly switches tropes to best fit whatever persona she needs. Rather than challenge her scribe’s authority, she submits to working with him for her own greater purpose of becoming an author. Margery and her scribe do come into a power struggle that goes back and forth and the attention drawn to both of their role exemplifies the multiple positions of importance (writer, auctor, and scribe) to form a cohesive medieval “author”. He controls when she can dictate her story to him again and finds her another worthy scribe and only after “grawntyng hym a fret summe of good for hys labowr” (20). Again, she manipulates the power play between submitting
to the scribal power both with money and with her trust. By displaying two such

dramatic tactics, the audience is able to see how she comes through the male scribe

and how she is straddled between the dualities of being authoritative and submissive.

Just like her duality between bodily angel and monster, her authority will be called

into question over and over again and she will have to find ways to find her voice,

answer back, and become the authority figure.

Her assertive episodes throughout the course of her Book seem to put Margery

in the figure of authority as well as keeping her narrative accurate with the sheer

boldness that shines through the text. If scribe’s job was to be like an auctor, and edit

the text or make more socially acceptable changes, it seems that something so

controversial or politically touchy might have been altered. Because Margery’s scribe

does not do this, he indirectly validates her story. Lynn Staley argues, “the presence

within the text of the Book’s scribes bearing witness to Margery’s veracity implicitly

assimilates it to sacred biography in which the lives of holy women were verified by

males” (Staley 3). Yet, Margery is aware that because the scribe can provide her with a

sense of validation to the medieval community, then her authority in a situation such

as defending herself in front of the clergy can be thus cemented as acceptable.

Even though switching between traditionally acceptable “male” and “female”

roles would rationally seem to be weakening to her goal of assuaging her literary

anxiety, often manipulating both tropes is acceptable and empowering. By embodying

both facets, she makes it clear that she realizes she posses both qualities. While she

wants to be a good woman, to make her spiritual path prevalent, she must employ the

male trope as well. As Timea Szell argues, “the narrative structure of her Book

(especially and most consistently the structure of external episodes) mirrors and

embodies the ultimate impossibility of reconciling and synthesizing Kempe’s

diametrically opposed desires” (75). Just as she has straddled the line of angel and

monster through her bodily antics, she goes further using both sides of herself to allow

for her to voice her anxiety and seemingly conquer it at the same time. In a sense,

Margery’s struggle and fears are based on polar representations of her visions and

herself: the spiritual versus the physical, the internal versus the external, and the public

versus the private. Szell points out that by making herself a third person character
through a first person account while putting it through scribal medium all allow her to make a persuasive narrative that convinces a bewildered public and audience that her experience stands strong and truthful (78-9).

Even though Margery seems acutely aware of switching both presentational and rhetorical techniques, she still retains the air of anxiousness, especially about her most controversial aspects of spirituality that still fascinate her audience even to the present day. As I have mentioned in previous chapters, her tears and flesh stand as constant source of anxiousness regarding the “truth” of her purpose and work. Her fear that her work may not be valid in the eyes of her audience constantly resonates with her (thus, the purpose of her seeking to align herself with a real foremother such as Julian of Norwich or a more transcendental one like Mary Magdalene). Though her paramount issues of fear are laden with separate social anxiety, at the forefront, they challenge her sense of authorship and representation of a mystical woman.

Margery’s position as an author and her accompanying fear of being invalidated contribute to the whole of her overall goal in the Book: finding her place in the Church, particularly the exclusively male clergy. She wants to be a valid mystic and a holy woman; gaining access to this position creates many of her fears. Her “anxiety of authorship” translates to her fear of public criticism and being denounced at the hands of holy men. As I explored in the first chapter, Margery’s tears are the outward expression of an inward agony that embodies her trepidation to assert herself and yet, places her within the holiest of positions. The tears are an important part of Margery’s validation as an author because they are her most empowering physical display throughout her story. By prominently displaying repeated instances of weeping, Margery and her scribe shine the focus on this corporeal anomaly. As previously stated, Margery views these tears as something good and holy; they are another aspect of ascetic suffering, another way she can use her body to transcend the limits of femininity that ostracize her from religion.

Because the crying is so integral to the text, and it appears that both Kempe and her scribe choose to include so many episodes of her tears, it thus makes it a norm for the reader and acceptable by repetition. Her weeping stands a mere representation of her holiness and power. As she points it out numerous times through her text, they
make her appear to her audience as a holy woman. Though they seem to be a mere rhetorical technique, they serve the great purpose of transforming her into a social martyr (and in a position of great importance) for her audience. Rhetorically, Kempe strengthens her position and purpose of authorship by imbedding her tears as the norm in her text. By emphasizing her weeping hundreds of time in the course of her narrative, she transfers her corporeality that she has come to rely on using, into textuality. The tears give her an outlet from being ostracized from her book—just as they gave her a place within the holy family and gave her an acceptable way to express her physicality, they also make her stand out and provide differentiation as a character in her text.

When she points out the horror of some of her fellow pilgrims and or the priests, the power is transferred to her by making the spectacle the center point of the experiences. Even though the attention appears to be negative, it in turn, serves a positive end. The practice of using her tears is to suffer for Christ while showing her devotion, being the center of religious attention and shock gives her a sense of authority. The weeping becomes a public demonstration of her validity—both as a holy woman and an author—by showing her ability to put herself in such a position in the literary, as well as literal, sense. This spectacle becomes validating because she has transferred the mystery and awe to something she considers to be a holy expression.

On the surface, Margery’s tears and her authorial anxieties appear to be unrelated. But, her most paramount issues throughout the text relate back to her body, the way the Church viewed it and how she utilizes her corporeality. The tears also serve as form of subservience to both a higher (male personified) power as well as submission to the editorial position of her male scribe. The particular episode in which the priests test her in chapter 83 shows how she is both willing to render her supposed power over men to seeming submission, while maintaining her own position in the religious tradition:

Tweyn presitys which had gret trost in hir maner of crying and wepyng, nevrthelesse thei wer symtyne in gret dowte wheyr it wer decevyvabyl er mot. Sche was al inflawmyd syth the fir of love, the which encresyd so sor that it brast owt wyth lowed voys and gret crying, that owr Lordys
name was the more magnifid amongsty hys sevawntys, to that sweryn
good, meke, and sympl sowlys and wold belevyn the goodness of owr
Lord Jhesu Crist. Hir crying gretly profityd to encres of merite and of
vertu. (190; emphasis mine)

Here, she both reinforces her womanly position beneath men by allowing the priests to
test her and call her own anxiety—that is, her authority and validity—into question.
She thus allows the questions to be thrown into the open and she answers back, and
this aligns the poles of both her authorship anxiety and her worries of the spectacle of
her tears. Though the weeping and being an author seem to be separate categories,
they emphasize her humility while demonstrating that she is a chosen servant of
Christ. Such a construction proves her to be holy enough to show clergymen how to
praise God’s name even more. Just as she uses her body to experience Christ, here she
uses her physical components to play a docile, angel role and allow that scribe to
inherently validate her experience.

Margery utilizes other physical attributes to prove her authority. Margery draws
on the medieval obsession with the physical body of Christ to fashion her own life as a
text. By placing herself within Biblical tradition and communicating directly with
Christ, Margery does not simply relate her experience—she draws her readership into
it. Margery as a character and the real woman become indistinguishable so that text
and author are one. Lochrie has argued that because the female flesh becomes such a
spectacle that it can serve a validating function for the bodily discomfort/authorial
anxiety that Margery has already felt. By making her tears a public spectacle, she
makes her body, as Lochrie says, “a spectacle of wonder and a marvelous language of
the “lamentabyl desyr” for the body of Christ” (174). She inscribes her tears, as well
as her body, as a part of the rhetoric and spirituality of the Book.

This technique is prevalently seen in the way Kempe employs herself as a
character throughout the course of her narrative. She authorizes herself by becoming a
third person character in Biblical setting. She does not simply imagine herself as a part
of Christ’s life and experiences: she becomes a part of them and asserts her authority
by writing herself into the Bible’s most important episodes. The clearest example of
this is the episode when she becomes handmaiden to the Holy Family. This practice of
writing herself into the literal landscape in Christ’s life occurs when he instructs her life of piety and “rewards” her by allowing her to physically hold him: “Dowtyr, thow desyrest gretyly to se me, and thu mayst boldly, whan thu art in thi bed, take me to the as for this weddyd husband. And therfor thu mayst boldly take me in the armys of thi sowle and kyssen my mowth, myn hed, and my fete as sweetly as thow wylt” (Kempe 95). Besides displaying her chaste sexuality and placing the importance of her physicality to the forefront, Margery displays an encompassing power to attach herself to Christ and both “right” her tradition as well as “write” herself into Christian affective piety.

Kempe further makes her character into a part of her text when she describes herself and her physicality in relation to her narrative. Christ says to her in Chapter 65: For thi terys aren awngelys drynk, and it arn very pyment to hem. Therfor, my derworthy dowtyr, be not yrke of me in erde to syttn alone be thiself and thynkn of my lofe, for I am not yrke of the and my merciful eye is evyr upon the” (Kempe 156). By exalting her tears to something as holy as an “angel’s drink,” Christ’s words and her experience coupled the scribe’s position as an editor seems to eradicate her fear. To her, Christ is the ultimate authoritative voice, so his comforting words about her controversial tears exalt her above her disapproving critics, as well as the lay audience. The rhetorical emphasis on her devotion amongst those who seek to condemn her simply makes a place for her in the said religious tradition that is given consent both by her own words and Christ himself.

Another way that Margery employs the tactic of becoming the text is in her bodily passions that she previously used to feel compassion for Christ. By inscribing her flesh into something textual, she transcends her womanly position. Instead of a passive voice, filtered through the aid of a scribe, she stands out as a holy woman and quite powerful. When she gains respect from the crowd of pilgrims, she is granted true authority over her published narrative. On her pilgrimage to Jerusalem, she clearly illustrates this, “Than the prese swor a gret othe, and be the boke in hy hand, that sche was as fals as che mygth be and dispysed hir and alto rebukyd hir” (75). She stands in the face of clerical criticism, only to follow up this rebuke by suffering a bodily episode in which she, “sufferyd hys peynys and hys passyons” (75). Her
representation of her character grants textual power, though she chooses to exemplify through the only source that gives her credence—her body. She simply employs another tactic to use her flesh to show her control over criticism. While she gains the graces of her fellow pilgrims, she simultaneously gains the validation to relate the experience in her *Book*.

In lieu of the questions about authority that she faces, Margery focuses heavily on her audience. This provides another outlet for her to gain authority. She positions her text as a type of conduct book. By doing so, she does a number of assertive tactics to establish her authority. She leads by example, sets herself as a feminine example, represents herself as a powerful woman (who is backed by the support of different clerical persons as well as her priest/scribe), and a “powerful rhetorician” (Glenn 541). Cheryl Glenn explains that Margery privileges her audience by projecting an ethos—the embodiment of her spiritual experiences, herself, her authorship and projects it onto audience truthfully and unapologetically (Glenn 540-1). This importance to Margery allows her to verify her story and help her carve the tradition within the Church she so desperately craves.

For all the compositional techniques that Kempe has employed to circumvent the problematic issues of the scribe and her power role in relation to her gender, the issue of her authorial validation in the text and its purpose remains one of her biggest sources of anxiety. In one perspective, this tale of an out of the ordinary woman who tells the story of herself from a third person perspective seems ideal for didactic purposes. It allots a voice to the woman mystic, but particularly it demonstrates realistic components of spiritual devotion for lay people. Much like Mary Magdalene in the Digby *Mary Magdalene* play, Margery presents herself as a character, who, like the character of Magdalene, changes from a life of sloth and sinfulness to realize her relationship with Christ and calling as a holy woman. Her *Book* becomes a script to teach the audience; thus, her place within the Church seems to be a teacher and it reaffirms her position as a mystic.

However, this seems to be, much like the other components of her life, one pole of the equation. The consideration of her audience to validate herself ties directly into what Margery wished to see her legacy as, or what exactly she craved from the
audience she presented the material too. Clarissa Atkinson notes that Margery’s *Book* was, “ordained to be a mirror for our time as well as her own [because] neither the author, her calling nor her book fit into conventional categories” (Atkinson 195). Even though her narrative eventually became a “mirror,” during her lifetime her writing was what freed her and allowed her to explore traditional gender roles and find her own niche within the patriarchal system of medieval religion.

*The Book of Margery Kempe* embodies what the narrative was to Margery in her lifetime and what it became to later generations. Margery frames it as a religious labor of love. She writes, “Whan this creatur was in cherche, owr Lord Jhesu Crist wyth hys gloryowys Modyr and many seyntys also comyn into hir sowle and thanky hir, seying that thei we wel plesyd wyth the writyng of this boke” (205). She steps into the role of foremother and mystical author and secures her place within in the textual tradition. She explicates her purpose of the work to be a labor for God. This coupled with the episodes in Book 2 of converting her son from his life of lechery, seems to give the modern reader the clearest explanation for what she wanted her work to be.

Margery also makes the composition of her book decidedly physical to emphasize her flesh that has been problematic and central throughout the entire course of her narrative. Both the didactic aspect for a largely female and monastic audience could be inferred through the way Margery frames her tears and bodily locale. “Whil the forseyd creatur was occupiid abowte the writyng of this tretys, sche had many holy teerys and wepingys. Also he that was hir writer cowed not sumtyme kepyn hymself from wepyng” (205). By emphasizing the physical tears that represent so many aspects of proof of her holiness, she shows the holy men and women that she is both a part of that tradition and seems to wish to inspire them as well. For the clerical men, these episodes would prove without a doubt that Margery’s experiences are real, valid and that she has a place within their Church, despite the patriarchal bias. She also makes this clear for women, perhaps so her *Book* could stand as a didactic treatise in the same way Julian of Norwich or Bridget of Sweden’s books did. Regardless of her supposed intention, Margery shows her authoritative intent more clearly and how she is, in every sense, the author of the book. She manages to affect her male confessor; her piety is paramount and her corporeal nature has extended to touch the men who influence the
work. This obviously shows their presence, their influence, but positions Margery as the sole creator of her own pious tradition.

Despite the “purpose” of the *Book*, Kempe demonstrates recurrent issues throughout the course of her composition that illustrate her anxiety. By making her flesh, her needs for feminine predecessors, her manipulation, her tears, and her fear the central focus of her narrative, she effectively works through her validation issues and by the end of Book 2, demonstrates her complete conversion to holiness. By showing herself as the ultimate religious woman, a spiritually chosen woman exalted close to Christ, she creates her own place within the mystical tradition and carves the space she had desired in the Church all along. She demonstrates this by recounting her experience after her many pilgrimages: “Therfor she was mevyd the mor ageyn hir, but owr Lord halpe hir so that sche had as good love of hym and of other frendys aftyr as sche had beforne, worschepyd be God” (Staley 230). Margery comes full circle here, completing her holy task, gaining her autonomy as an author (as well as pilgrim and mystic).

The writing, the publishing and even the subsequent editing and commentary on the *Book* all show how important Margery’s labor of love was to find the place in both aspects of spirituality. By gaining the approval of her scribe, audience, and numerous confessors, she frees herself from the constraints of anxiety that once held her. Her writing grants her her freedom, her religious place and her legacy that both teaches its readers generation after generation, and most importantly, it places her in the role of a holy woman and she finds her niche in the medieval Church at last.
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Danielle Robitaille came to Florida State University in 2000 for her undergraduate degree and fell in love with literature. She started graduate school in 2003, specializing in medieval studies, focusing on women’s spirituality, Arthurian legend, and Old English literature. Following the completion of MA in English from FSU, she hopes to go on for a doctorate and fulfill her dream of becoming a professor.